

A Friendly Persuasion

Craig A. Eddy



Book 1 of
Except for Thee and Me

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by
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is

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Chapter 1

Answers Breed Questions

(Monday morning)

"I don't see why you have anything to complain about," Lily said, as they sat in her kitchen. "You've achieved everything that you started out to do, hon."

"It just seems like we're putting out brush fires all over the world," her daughter said in disgust. "Yea, a majority of the population of the world is trained, and they're training their children. But the ones that can't be trained keep trying to create dissension. And short of rounding them up and putting them all in one place, I don't see how we can stop it!"

"Oh, my darling daughter who wants things instantly," Fred piped up from the other side of the table. "It's only been five years. Well, nine altogether since you were first trained, but five since you went on the warpath and did the mass training. It could take three generations or more before you lose all the hard-nosed bigots and bullies."

"That's not what's actually got you going, today, is it?" Lily asked.

"No," Muriel said with a sigh. "I just don't see how it's going to work out. I like him. Hell, I love him. And I finally understand what YOU mean by love. It's not the soppy, romantic stuff of books and movies. It's the quiet caring about another person. It's more akin to what parents have for children." And her father cheered. "Quiet, you. You're not helping things," she added, and he laughed. And, finally, so did she.

"We know what we have," Muriel went on. "We respect each other's positions, opinions . . . stuff. We discuss things, constantly. And yes, dad, we spend more time talking with each other than we do anything else. And you can keep your nose out of the 'everything else', thank you, very much. We get enough of that from the media. But that's not the worst. The worst is the pressures from the Queen, the British government, the American government, and I swear that half the Envoys have opinions as to what I should do!"

"Well, as to the 'everything else'," her father said, "it's not my problem. We – your mother and I – both think that you're old enough to know what you want to do, and the possible consequences of your actions. We're here if you need questions answered or support. It's not that we don't care. We do. But our opinions have no bearing on what you do. We can't live your lives for you, or make your decisions. All we can do is offer our support when things get rocky. And you've always been a step ahead of us in dealing with things BEFORE they get rocky. So, we're staying out of that side of it."

"However . . .," he said.

"Oh, oh. HERE it comes," Muriel said.

"The media is the media. You keep putting them down, and they don't get the point,"

Fred went on. "You've proven them wrong so many times and in so many ways that you'd think that they'd have learned by now. But they haven't. They keep following a formula that has worked in the past. Sex sells, and any hint of it in 'important' people just makes it juicier and sells more ads. As for the various pressures on you two . . . well, I'm sure you've tried talking to the various parties."

"Boy, you can say that again!" Muriel exclaimed. "More than once we've told them to butt out – that it's none of their business. But they're still looking at the world as divided – that my being 'in residence' in a particular country is something significant."

"Well," Fred said, "I'd suggest setting up an office in EVERY country. But that would just leave you more divided than you are, now."

"It was a thought," Muriel said. "And a good one. But Taylor and I had come to the same conclusion. We're divided enough as it is, now. Time zones. There's only about a third of a day when we can get together in any way. Morning and afternoon here, afternoon and evening there. Oh, emergencies, we do what we have to do regardless of what time it is. But for just getting together to go out to dinner or something we're limited."

"I can imagine," her father said. "Including all the things you don't tell your parents. And no, I'm not asking. But I can see and understand where some of the conflicts are."

"No, you're not asking," Muriel said. "Just making assumptions."

"Nope. Not even that," her father said. "More a case of realizations of possibilities. And without any suggestion that any of the possibilities is an actuality."

"You MEAN that!"

"Yep. Muriel, daughter, you're long past the age of being able to make your own decisions. NINE YEARS past the age," he said. "That was a tough time for me, but blessedly short. When I realized that my darling daughter had her own opinions and was a capable human being. At twelve! Well, I got over it. And since then I've never seen anything to refute that. Nope, your personal life is your own. But your mother and I have gone through some of this, ourselves, and understand some of the pressures on you. Oh, maybe not to the degree that they're affecting you. But still . . ."

"OK, I'll pull my spines back in," Muriel said, and he laughed. "You know? Maybe that's the way to hit them. Make them think of their own lives, rather than the garbage they were taught as children."

"More like tickling fish," her mother said. "First you gain their trust and confidence by seeming to take them into YOUR confidence. Then you abuse it by hitting them with the reality." And she snickered. "Or like the Society of Friends."

"Who?" asked Muriel.

"The Quakers. Oh, that term," her mother said. "And all because a Magistrate judge said something to the effect that the founder of the sect 'bade them tremble at the word of the Lord.' But they didn't believe in violence. Instead, they tried to persuade others to their way of thinking in a friendly way. There's an old movie about the conflicts that attitude caused one family during the Civil War. 'Friendly Persuasion'."

"I'll look it up," Muriel said. "And I'll look up the Quakers and see what I can find out about their methods. Right now, I'd try just about anything!" And she translated out.

"Isn't it amazing, dear," Fred said, "how the older she gets the more she comes to us to help her understand things."

"Not really. You remember how you were," Lily said. "It was years before you understood that your parents were young once, and had managed to live through it."

"Humph," he snorted. "Yes, and I managed to live through it, too. AND understand that I didn't have all the answers. Nobody does. Oh, there are similarities in individual lives. But, overall, there are enough differences to make each child's life unique. Something different than that of their parents or friends. You know, dear, I still morn what happened to Fran's family."

"I know, dear," she said. "So do I. But there was nothing we could do. And we tried. And sometimes that's all we can do."

"So, do we tell her that at one time we considered the Quaker religion?" he asked.

"Nope. Nor do we tell her that the author of the book that that movie was based on was related to a President that was one. And that he was possibly the worst example of how a Quaker was supposed to behave that could ever be. It would just confuse her," her mother said.

And back in Muriel's office, Mata said, "Go. There's nothing here that needs you, and we know where to find you if you ARE needed." And Muriel translated again. Mata just smiled like an indulgent mother. She knew this was a tough time for Muriel. After all, she was that deep in the girl's mind. But she was happy that the girl had found a companion. And an ocean away, Muriel walked into Taylor's office and quietly took a seat in the casual area.

"Now look, your Highness, you must understand that this is for the good of the country! A link between you and the Leader of Home would guarantee that Britain would get preferential treatment," the man said.

"Bullshit," Muriel quietly said. "It would mean nothing of the sort. Any personal agreement between Taylor and I would be just that – PERSONAL! There would be no preferential treatment, because none is needed. Home cares about ALL people. Not the countries they live in. If you can't understand that, then you have no place in even being involved in the discussion."

"Young lady, I'll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself," he said. And Taylor just raised his eyebrows and had a quiet smile on his face.

"Tell me, sir. Would you talk to Her Majesty the Queen that way?" asked Muriel.

"Of course not! But you're no Queen," he said. Muriel simply pulled out a familiar green booklet and handed it to him.

"Oops," Taylor said. "Didn't expect that one, did you? You just told the Leader of a whole other world that her opinion was meaningless. NOT good. You really need to do your homework. So . . . in order to keep you from putting your foot in your mouth up to the knee again, allow me to introduce you to Ambassador Muriel, Leader of Home and, oh, by the way, she also happens to be a citizen of Britain and a Duchess. In fact, solely on British hierarchy, I believe she outranks you. And, contrary to your unpopular opinion, what she and I decide between ourselves has nothing to do with this country."

"There has been a plethora of balderdash bantered about, lately," Muriel said. "Now, don't you think that maybe it's time that such personally invasive lack of intelligence ended? Let's take a hypothetical situation. Suppose that Taylor and I married, and he became King. Now, normally, the lower ranked or powered party, under your inane supposition, would go to live with the higher ranked or powered party. Isn't that right?"

"Well . . . uh . . . I don't know"

"Actually, you do know. It's happened time and time again throughout your history. What you're actually proposing is that Taylor go to live in Home with me, rather than my coming to Britain. And, therefore where would your preferential treatment be? Under the old ways, that 'preferential treatment' would simply mean that you'd be paying more in taxes and such to support the greater power – Home. And getting less for it," Muriel said. "Is that really what you want? You want to be taken over by another nation? You want Britain to simply become a memory, a footnote in history books? A satellite of a greater nation? You've fought against even the appearance of it with regard to America. Why do you think that the people of Britain would be any more conducive to such a situation with a world that could crush and obliterate your country without even raising a sweat?"

"But . . . surely you wouldn't do that!" he said. "Everyone knows that Envoys are peaceful people."

"Envoys are. I'm not," Muriel said, gently. "I'm not an Envoy. Look at that passport. TWO names. Envoys only have one. TWO NAMES – because I'm as human as you are. My full name is Muriel White. I only use my first name because it tends to make people feel more personal to me and I to them. But, when the gloves come off, then I trot out the titles. But STILL not my last name. Why is that, do you suppose?"

"I have no idea."

"Simple. Why should I inflict my opinions on my parents? I owe them a great deal.

But I'm not them and they're not me. I am my own person, and have been making my own decisions since I was twelve. I have an education that goes far beyond anything you've even imagined. And experience! I've had to deal in national and international events for the past nine years. And international stupidity, for all that. No," Muriel said, "your opinion concerning Taylor and I has no bearing. And that goes for your jolly friends that have just put you in the position of being given the talking to of your life by the very person whose opinions you felt were worthless. So . . . homework," she added. "You go back to those dunder headed throwbacks to the sixteenth century and enlighten them as to the realities of life. You do NOT direct the royalty of the world in how it should behave in private. You do not tell the leaders of ANY country what they can and cannot do with their personal lives. It's not your place to do that. Especially since this IS personal to Taylor and I. Why, the next thing you know you'd be telling us that we had to be married in the Anglican church. NOT going to happen. IF Taylor and I choose to get married it would be by the customs and rules of Home."

"I wasn't aware that Home had any customs and rules regarding marriage," the man said.

"My, my. You ARE in for a surprise, then. Yes, it does. It's even in that quasi-historical religious work you venerate. I'll let you look it up. I have more important things to do with my time than do your homework," she said. "Now, why don't you get out of here, and let us get on with our important functions." And he left. Shocked to his socks. And it was a good thing that he left so quickly, because as soon as he was out of ear shot Taylor burst into laughter. And Muriel joined him.

"Oh, my!" Taylor finally said. "I thought he was going to choke when you reminded him that marriage between two principals of two different countries ALWAYS resulted in the lesser becoming a satellite of the greater."

"Wait until he stumbles over the scripture concerning marriage and Home," Muriel replied. "He'll faint."

"Why?"

"Matthew 22:30 - ' . . . they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as angels in heaven.' Look it up. Of course, it ignores what REALLY goes on," Muriel said.

"I didn't know you could quote the Bible?" Taylor responded.

"Yep. I found it beneficial when I was taking on the church that demonized Fran," Muriel said, laughing. "I never thought I'd need THAT line, though."

"So, what really goes on?" asked Taylor.

"Envoys – and returned humans – simply get together as the inclination takes them," Muriel replied, smiling. "For companionship. Sometimes for more than that, with returned humans. After all, they have the knowledge of having had a body, and shields can be very

helpful.” And Taylor sputtered.

“Your KIDDING!”

“Nope. I’ve been doing some research the past few years. After all, I’ve been ‘ordered’ to come up with some polite words for two pairs of friends that want to get married when they reach their twenty-first birthdays,” Muriel said. “One of the first things I looked up – well, OK, I asked Mata – was what Home has for customs and rules. BOY, did I get an ear full! That’s when I looked up that passage.”

“You’re right. He’s going to faint. Maybe even have a heart attack, if he honestly understands that passage. Basically, there’s no marriage because people just live together!” Taylor said, laughing. “You’re BAD!”

“I know. But you seem to like it,” Muriel replied. It was five minutes before Taylor could stop laughing. Every time he looked at Muriel’s innocent face, he’d start right back in laughing.

“Oh, Muriel, you’re delightful. Sorry I hollered for help,” Taylor said.

“Why? You had him reeling. I could tell that from what he was saying when I entered,” she said. “I simply threw him out of the ring.”

“You did, that. But now I’ve got another one to deal with,” he said. “I KNOW where this is coming from, now. You don’t have to stay for this if you don’t want to.”

“I’m staying. Parents, grandparents, it doesn’t matter. It’s time they butted out of our private lives,” she replied.

“OK,” Taylor said. “This should DEFINITELY be interesting, then.”

Chapter 2

First Confrontation

(Monday morning, later)

"Mom, dad, can we see you?" Taylor said and sent.

"Oh, oh," his father said as they translated in. "This doesn't sound good."

"Tea?" asked Taylor.

"Definitely not good," said his mother. "No, dear. I think we should simply hear what you have to say."

"I just went through another confrontation with the 'government'," Taylor said. "In fact, it might be best if we included grandmother in this, so I only have to say it once."

"I'll go, son," the Prince said. "It might be better. I think I know what this is about. And I think I know where it's going to end up. She shouldn't be busy, right now." And he translated out.

In moments, he was back. And the Queen was sputtering. "What is the meaning of this. I will NOT be summoned like some errant child," she said.

"Sit down, grandmother. It's time we had this out," Taylor said.

"I will NOT sit down, young man. You do not summon the Queen!"

"No," Muriel said. "But I do. And if you think that that's an empty threat, remember who outranks whom, here. Sit down, Your Majesty. You really need to hear this," she said, quietly. She sat.

"Now then," Taylor started out. "I've been through too many Members of Parliament 'reminding' me of my position. That's unfortunate. The last one was just moments ago, and Muriel let him know on no uncertain terms that we would not be married by the Anglican rites. She suggested that, instead, we might opt to be joined by the customs and rules of Home. Do any of you KNOW what those are?" Three faces looked confused, and three heads shook, 'no'.

"Muriel, would you, please?" asked Taylor.

"Sure. Does one of you have a Bible. Or at least a New Testament?" The Queen took one out of her purse. "Good. Turn to Matthew 22:30, please, and read what it says."

The Queen turned to the passage and read, "For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven." Then went white. "But

surely that means after death?”

“Does it?” Muriel asked. “At the time that that was written, the ONLY way to get to Home was to die. Times have changed. There is no marriage in Home. There is no need of such conventions, and in fact they would be a source of contention. Angels – Envoys – don't marry. They have relationships with each other of varying lengths. But nothing permanent. Why? Because they are, for all intents and purposes, immortal. The only Envoys that have died are those that have been killed or voluntarily suicided. NONE have died of old age, and they are far older than you can even imagine. And humans are souled by Envoys. So, when we go back to Home, the earthly conventions end. And for the same reason. We are, effectively, immortal – at least our souls are. So, the convention in Home is that people that want to be together simply ARE together, for as long as it serves them.”

“But . . . you're saying that they just live together!” the Queen said.

“Of course,” Taylor said. “How else? They are friends. They care about each other. And they have common interests to share. So, why shouldn't they be together? There is no financial reason to make a contract, no political reason for the joining. And they have the 'responsibility for their own actions' to keep the relationship from becoming abusive.”

“I always thought that it meant there was no physical joining,” the Prince said.

“You mean sexual intercourse,” Muriel interjected. “You haven't been to Home very often and looked around. The only reason it isn't happening in the streets is because they respect the rights of others. But the reality is that humans retain the knowledge of having a body, and can create enough, using shields, to manage such a relationship. And they do. And not always with the one that had been their spouse. And before you holler 'blasphemy', realize that it isn't. The Gospel of Matthew never said WHAT happened in Home. Neither do any of the other Gospels. Only what DIDN'T happen in Home. Reality bites. There isn't rape. There isn't forced marriage. There aren't contracts and agreements. In fact, Ted had to teach Envoys what all that meant when he set up the original Enclave. True innocence. Love and the expression of love simply because two people love each other.”

“Now, that is the threat that Muriel handed that long winded stuffed shirt that just left,” Taylor said. “And it IS a threat. We don't HAVE to get married, if we choose not to. So, I suggest that you call off your dogs. Make it clear to them that what Muriel and I decide is OUR decision, and not theirs. That they have absolutely NO voice in our private lives. Otherwise, I'll add a threat of my own.” And this time it was his parents that turned white.

“You don't meant” his father began.

“I certainly do. Keep it up, and I'll take myself out of the line of succession. I'll leave the Regiment in the hands of Sid, and move to America,” Taylor said. “One more visitor such as I had today and it'll be a done deal. You, Your Majesty,” he said, with some contempt, “will be interrupted in a Parliament session by the arrival of a formal declaration, and that will be an end to it.”

"You young whippersnapper! You have NO idea what you're saying. You'd be dragged back for the good of the country!" sputtered the Queen.

"Muriel, my salary since I was made an Ambassador. What would it take to move it out of a British bank?" asked Taylor.

Muriel paused for a moment, then said, "It's done. Untouchable, in a bank owned by Home. You can move in any time you want. Either in guest house, or my apartment, as you choose."

As she was speaking, Taylor concentrated, then came up with a piece of vellum.

*Be it known that
I, Taylor
Known as Prince of the Realm
Do hereby relinquish my titles, lands and
awards.*

*This action is taken in response to the
unreasonable interference of the government in the
personal life of the aforementioned Taylor, and
may not be rescinded, revoked or otherwise set
aside by any group, organization, government, or
other earthly entity.*

*In Seal thereof
Taylor*

"I trust this will suffice," Taylor said, holding up the document.

"It doesn't have your last name or title," his father said. "Therefore it wouldn't be considered legal.

"You're right," Taylor said. "It doesn't have my last name or title. I no longer have one." And his mother fainted. "I have funds, should I need them. I have a place to go, as Muriel so ably mentioned. And I have a position, though you might not like that. Perhaps Muriel would be kind enough to allow me to relinquish the title of Ambassador to the people of Britain. She might even find another position for me. Perhaps Jester to the Court of Home, or some such."

"Taylor, you can't be serious!" his father said.

"Were you and your mother serious when you sent those offensive and officious Ministers of Parliament to try to convince me of my 'duty' to my country?" he asked. "It seemed pretty serious to them. Either this stops, NOW, or the edict goes in. To Parliament. To the Media. To anybody that wants it. I'm through playing around with you people. You deal with me as an adult, which I've been for two years, now, or you deal with me as an adult that is no longer your son, or even a citizen of Britain. I've tried being nice. I've tried being pleasant and explaining my position. I've even tried just throwing people out. NOTHING seems to have gotten through. Then it occurred to me where I'd kept hearing a certain phrase – 'the good of the country' – over and over again. Then I realized that it was not only the Queen, but my own parents. One way or another, it's over. What Muriel and I do is OUR business, and not part of the government. One. Way. Or. Another!" he exclaimed, and his eyes glowed black, with red dots in the center that seemed at once far away and very close. "Choose. Now. Or I'll choose for you!"

"YOU!" shouted the Queen, pointing at Muriel.

"NO!" responded Taylor's father. "NOT her. You. You've been after him from the beginning. He's at least giving you a choice, which you NEVER gave him. You've NEVER been honest with him, or treated him as the adult he is. I refuse to lose my son because of your machinations. Either you put it to Parliament, NOW, that this farce is ended, or I'll join him. His leaving would mean the end of the monarchy, and maybe that's a good thing. But it will not mean the end of my family."

"Taylor," Muriel spoke up. "Give me two days, and I can have a place prepared for the Regiment. Or at least those that choose to follow you."

"Granted," Taylor said. "Your move, grandmother. Choose. I think even Parliament would understand what you've done. I don't expect that you'd be Queen much longer. So choose wisely."

"You haven't heard the last of this, young man!" the Queen said. And, without warning, all of them found themselves sitting in the casual area of Muriel's office, in the American Enclave.

"Yes, I think I have," Taylor said. "You have no way to stop me. You have no way to bully me. Either you accept us as we are, or you turn your back on your own position. That will be achieved, not by me, but by the government of Britain and the very people, themselves."

Ted, who'd been in his accustomed place in Muriel's office, waiting for her, just stared at Taylor, then at his parents and the Queen. And he was afraid to even move, much less translate out, for fear he'd draw attention to himself. Taylor had even rearranged the office to allow for another recliner next to Muriel's. Mata, on the other hand, simply studiously went on with her work.

"Something else that you might consider, very seriously," Muriel said, quietly – her dangerous voice. "I know where this is actually coming from. And I expect you to put a stop to it immediately. What's left of those money grubbing companies, after the mass training, are trying to put a wedge between you and the country. They're CONTROLLING you. They've bought and paid for Parliament, and we can supply the proof of that and the individuals involved. Though you should already know which individuals by who's been visiting Taylor. End it. Put them on notice for attempting to interfere with the government of Britain. And put Parliament on notice that anyone voicing this nonsense will be found guilty of treason, since what they're trying to do is supplant the future King with a puppet."

"Father," Taylor said. "As simply a man and not your son or a Prince, could I ask you to return Her Majesty to her home. You needn't see her there, yourself. Just deposit her where you found her. Then you can decide what you and my mother wish to do. Muriel, can I claim a room in Guest House for the time being? I've already let Sid know that I won't be back right away. If ever. We'll give the Queen time to realize the depth of this decision."

And Mata finally spoke up. "You've got a suite, Taylor. Saul can bring your Envoys to assist you. Those you keep, no matter what happens, or where you go. Your parents also have a suite, should they choose to use it. I've got Legal purchasing the property adjacent to this. We can have barracks and dining room set up in a day. Another, and we'll have Administrative offices set up."

"You retain your position as Ambassador and the head of the Regiment of Home. Whatever else, we can talk about," Muriel added.

"Son," Taylor's mother, who had come out of her swoon, said, "is this wise?"

"Perhaps the wisest thing I've ever done, other than being trained. This has gone on for too long. And it wasn't until today that I realized WHY it was going on. The intent was to keep me off balance," he said, "to force me to become a puppet of Parliament. It's not going to happen. There have been weak Kings in Britain's past. A certain John comes to mind. I have no intention of doing away with democracy. And I won't be dictated to, either. Of all the citizens of Britain, shouldn't a King also be a free man?" he asked. "So, now what the Queen faces is either a strong future King, or no monarchy at all, which would leave an unregulated Parliament to rule the country. And that, as she well knows, would be a disaster."

"How so?" asked Muriel.

"The country would be in a state of civil war within one month of Parliament passing some of the nonsense that, up to now, has been rejected by the crown," Taylor said. "Their plan to raise taxes on the middle class in order to support – oh, I'm sorry – bail out the major companies would cause massive bankruptcies of the citizens and throw the economy back into a tail spin. At that point, NO Member of Parliament would be safe. They have to go home, sometime. And though Britons don't as a rule have guns, gasoline, bottles and rags are readily available. So are rocks, heavy canes, caltrops, and other assorted casual weapons. You'd see MP's resigning in droves, if they were lucky enough to avoid the first wave of attacks. That would leave no government at all. Anarchy."

"Is that what you want, Your Majesty?" asked Muriel. "A bloodbath? A country reduced to something like that? I can suggest another possible future. About seventy percent of the population is trained, and can defend themselves. They'd become the police force – or vigilante force, if you prefer – that would quickly request the aid of Home in the form of becoming an Enclave of Home. You know it's been done before. You were at the signing when China was recognized as an Enclave. Another form of annexation of the small by the powerful. How about that as a future. Either way, you'd be out of a job."

"You leave me no choice," the Queen said.

"Oh, you have a choice," Muriel replied. "Taylor's given you one. Stop the harassment. Stop Parliament from pressuring Taylor to make impossible promises. Make a proclamation that it would be in the best interest of the country to accept that Taylor is an adult and his own man, and that they have no control over his actions. And that his personal life is his own, and his actions in that personal life have no bearing on the country or its government. And that if the harassment continues the government will collapse and the country will be in a state of savagery. That's the choices."

"Oh, very well," the Queen replied. "Taylor, destroy that absurd document and I'll make the proclamation."

"I don't think she's learned, yet, Taylor. Your Majesty," Muriel continued. "Destroying the document wouldn't do any good. Once made it can be made again in an instant. And it could be disseminated in the next instants. No, ma'am. The document stays, until such time as the next ruler takes the throne, whoever it might be. Chuck, could we have lunch in here, please?"

"Right away, Muriel," he replied.

Chapter 3

First Confrontation, Continued (Monday afternoon, Tuesday morning)

“Very well, young man,” the Queen said, as they finished lunch – dinner for them. “I’ll make the proclamation. But it will be up to you to explain it to Parliament.”

“Very well,” Taylor said. “I can do that. And just to keep you honest, Muriel may I use your printer?”

“Of course,” she replied.

“Good. There,” he said, when the printer was finished. “This is a list of the things that were suggested that you make plain in the proclamation. I won’t stop you from making it as you see fit. But I WILL make sure that these points are made plain to Parliament. And that the ultimatum is also made plain, along with the possible consequences of their not respecting my rights,” Taylor said. “Just so you know.”

“So be it,” the Queen said, with venom. “Son, take me home.” And she disappeared, translated back to her quarters. Taylor’s father, conspicuously, didn’t.

“Dear, I think we should spend the night in Guest House. For our health,” the Prince said. “Oh, and Taylor? Something I don’t think you know. Shortly after you became the Colonel in Chief of the Regiment, I pulled myself out of the line of succession. So, your grandmother can’t even name me instead of you. You’ve demonstrated a higher level of education, and a better grasp of what was happening. And you showed that you were a stronger person than I. Whatever happens, we’ll back you.” And they translated out.

“Muriel, you made a reference to your apartment . . . ,” Taylor started.

“Are you serious about wanting me in your life, and being in my life?” asked Muriel.

“Yes. Of course!” he said.

“Then there’s no reason why your sleeping arrangements should be a matter for anyone but us,” she answered. “Five years, Taylor. Five years of waiting, since our first kiss. Five years of wondering when the axe would fall. Today it fell. But it wasn’t in the hands I was afraid would be holding it. That was quite a declaration of independence you gave. Yes, if you’d like to sleep with me, that’s fine. You might think otherwise, afterward. But we’ll face that when it comes.” They translated out to her apartment.

The next morning took a little ‘getting used to’ for Muriel. She woke up with her head on a shoulder. A male shoulder. A naked male shoulder. And then, the night before came rushing back to her. HOO! Boy did it come rushing back to her, and she turned red all the way down to her armpits. And just when she thought the shocks were over, she realized that

the privacy curtain wasn't in place, and her stomach turned to ice. FINALLY, she realized that Taylor and she were the only two in the apartment. Chuck hadn't come up to make breakfast. Yet.

However, whether or not Chuck would arrive, she had an urgent need, and made a bee-line to the bathroom at the other end of the apartment. She managed to even get a quick shower and get dressed and out the door before she noticed a naked missile aimed right for her. She dodged, just in time, and Taylor took advantage of the absence, skidding into the bathroom while she giggled.

"Take a shower and get dressed before you come out," she said. "I'll tidy up the bed and see what I can scare up for breakfast."

"No you won't," said a voice behind her. "I just waited until I was sure you were dressed," Chuck said. "Go ahead and get the bed. I'll start breakfast. Oh," he added, with a grin, "congratulations." She hit him, and he grinned even wider.

Taylor came out as she finished with the bed, following his nose. Chuck just smiled and pointed to a chair. Muriel discretely walked back to the table and took her place.

"You know, I believe next time I'll translate there, and save the worry," Taylor said. "You have a beautiful apartment, Muriel, but it's HUGE. And the bathroom's too bloody far away from the bed."

"So I noticed," she said. "And I agree. Translation sounds like a good idea. What's on, Chuck?"

"Truck driver's breakfast. I thought you could use the protein and carbohydrates," he replied. "It's so good to see you both happy and relaxed. Don't worry, I won't come up until I know you're dressed. Or at least where you can get dressed without feeling embarrassed."

"How do you know when that is?" asked Taylor.

"Mata. She's deep in Muriel's mind. Oh, she doesn't peek or anything like that. But she can tell when Muriel's comes out of the shower and puts on a uniform or whatever," Chuck said. "However, I should warn you. You lit up Enclave last night. People will know that you finally managed to get together, even if they weren't eavesdropping. That much emotion tends to show up. And ALL the Envoys are happy for you two."

"Oh, gad! Do I need to put another shield on the apartment?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, not on our account," which comment earned Chuck ANOTHER hit. "Seriously, Muriel, it might be a good idea. Wouldn't want to shock the children."

After breakfast, the additional shield to block outgoing emotional feelings was the first order of business. The second was to let the shields know that Taylor was allowed entrance at any time without needing permission. THEN, they finally went to her office. And Muriel

blushed again.

Waiting for her were all her friends. Grinning. Girls, starting with Fran, came up and hugged her. The boys, starting with Don, shook Taylor's hand and congratulated him. And the blushes just kept coming, as the boys shifted to Muriel's side and each claimed a rather chaste kiss of best wishes.

"I'm going to be afraid to stick my nose out of the office," Muriel commented.

"Oh, don't worry," Ted said, coming through the door. "We know where to find you." Then he was kissing her. "It took you long enough, young lady. And here I thought you were the impetuous one." And she hit him. And blushed again.

"Harrumph!" Muriel muttered. "Mata, what's going on, today?"

"The Queen has called a massed Parliamentary meeting," Mata replied. "This is when she's going to let them know what is what."

"I've got to be there. Mata, do you have a location and time?" Taylor asked.

"Yes. In about a half hour," Mata replied, sending him the image.

"You're not going alone, buster. I intend to reinforce it," Muriel said.

"I wouldn't think of going without you," Taylor said. "Even if it were just for the company." And Muriel blushed. "And if you don't stop blushing, EVERYONE will know what we've been doing."

"Too late," Don said, "We already do." And FRAN hit him. Muriel just super-strengthened the last shield on her apartment.

"OK, I know the place. And I know where we can go to be inconspicuous," Taylor said. The hall's already filling up. So let's go." Muriel quickly switched to 'Fighting Formals' – the kilted version – and they translated out.

And in a dark corner of the hall, Muriel and Taylor watched the people arrive, and took note of the substance of their speech. In addition to the Members of Parliament, many representatives of the media arrived, including television cameras. That surprised Taylor, but not Muriel. Finally the flood of people trickled to a stop, and the Queen arrived.

"I have been asked, by my grandson, to tell you that any further attempt to convince him to do his duty for his country will result in his abdicating his position. He told me that it infringes his right to a private life. Further, so he says, if you do continue and he leaves us, the nation will devolve into civil war within a month, and that none of us will be safe. So. I've told you. We can only hope that you don't do something stupid," the Queen concluded.

Taylor didn't wait, but translated to the place she'd vacated at the podium.

“Grandmother,” he said in a quiet voice that Muriel had taught him to amplify all over the hall, “that was a poor excuse for the proclamation I told you to give.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen . . . if any of you are either . . . in essence, what my grandmother told you is true. One more harassment – one more attempt to garner favoritism from Home by my possible marriage to Her Grace, Muriel, Ambassador to the people of earth and Leader of Home will result in my renunciation of my titles, lands, and awards. Further, I've already heard from the Regiment of Home. If I leave – and I assure you I won't stay in a country that so abuses its people – if I leave, they will go with me. It's possible that a few might remain. Should that happen, they are welcome to raise a new regiment. But it would NOT be the Regiment of Home. That distinction goes with those that have earned it. Further, the home of the Regiment would no longer be the British Enclave. That property is owned by the Duchess, Muriel. At the present time it's been decided to continue the theme side of it, and the school. At least until school is out. After that, parents would have to find another place for their children. As to the civil war – over half the voting population of this country is trained. When they learn what you have been attempting to do they are likely to be a bit incensed. I wouldn't put it past people to resort to violence, if necessary, to make sure that you people are never in ANY government position of whatever level. Muriel disagrees with me as to the violence. But I've seen what people in this country can do. And I pity you. Because I don't expect that I'll ever see any of you again.” And he stood aside.

And Muriel translated into his place. “So. You think to gain leverage over a more powerful nation through marriage. I told the Queen this, and now I'll tell you. The greater power ALWAYS takes the lesser power as a satellite. This country would be ruled by Home, rather than you. Your machinations would bring this country to the status of just another has-been. Perhaps that's what you want? The Queen's position would also be eliminated. I told Taylor and the Queen that there was an alternative to the violence of the people. Since the majority of your voting population are trained, they can simply request that Britain become an Enclave of Home. The takeover, then, would be effected by elements of Home, including your arrest and conviction for harassment and invasion of privacy. And as for a grand wedding? Well, that's out. Taylor and I have attained consort status under the customs and rules of Home. There will be no grand wedding for you to witness. No contracts as one-sided as you can create. No delays. No attempts to influence the population will be available to you. And no attempts to put further pressure on either Taylor or I will occur. The deed is done, and cannot be undone. We ARE consorts.”

“I am ashamed of you people. For nine years I've worked to try to create a better world. One where the need for greed was abolished. One where anyone could have the necessities of life, and even many of the luxuries. Yet you abysmal creatures have spent the entire time trying to make a puppet out of Taylor. Starting with your Queen. I'm ashamed of you, and sorry for you. Your final trip to Home may very well turn out to be very final. The shock you will get when you find out just how much harm you've done or attempted to do, even in just those nine years, may cause even your soul to die. NO continuation. No second chance. No forgiveness, for you will not be able to forgive yourselves for your poor judgment. You – all of you – have been offered the opportunity to take the training, and you've refused. You – all of you – have been warned repeatedly against the harassment of Taylor. By him. By me. Yet you persisted. Taylor and I will be leaving for the American Enclave. He needs a

break away from bungling Members of Parliament, and I intend to give him that opportunity.”

“Now, as for you members of the media. You have persisted in spreading rumors that you knew were not true, but were sensational and therefore sold advertising space. With regard to Taylor, that's over. Anything other than FACTS, checked and double checked, and the sources listed could result in charges of harassment, invasion of privacy, defamation of character, and possibly treason for as long as Taylor remains a Royal. Taylor and I have talked about this and he agrees. This is the only warning you will get, you and the companies you work for. Breach that privacy with rumors, and you will find yourselves in jail on charges leveled by the current laws of the land. Both you and your companies. So, think carefully before you try to spread rumors, spin, tilt, massaging, or any of the other euphemisms you use for your lies. We who are trained have capabilities beyond any you can imagine for knowing if you further break the law. I repeat, this is the ONLY warning you will get. You've had your field day at playing at being news media while actually trying to foster a political agenda either of your company's making or at the bidding of some other agency of ill will. It's over. Deal with it.”

“Now, there is another matter that I think you members of Parliament should be aware,” Muriel continued. “I happen to know who has been paying each of you, under the table, to continue this abominable assault on Taylor and I. You would better be termed puppets than members of Parliament. Be advised, that if I even hear a whisper of an attempt to continue this harassment, that will be made public. And I seriously doubt that you OR the companies that are pulling your strings will last a week, no matter where you hide. Your own people, the people you are SUPPOSED to be serving, would see to your demise,” she concluded, and stepped back.

“I will add one more thing,” the Queen said. “During the past five years, members of Parliament and representatives of the media have played me, without my realizing it until now. And for that reason, I will be stepping down in favor of Taylor. Effective immediately, I am abdicating. Taylor is now your King. What action he takes from this point on is up to him. But I suggest that you not cross him. Taylor, Muriel,” she added, “I'm sorry. I didn't realize just how determined you were.” Then Taylor and Muriel translated out, abruptly ending the meeting.

“Did you know that that meeting was carried live?” Mata asked, as they translated in.

“No,” Muriel said.

“Yep. And the reports I'm getting is that the building is now surrounded, ten deep, with trained people. Including kids,” Mata said. “Many kids and some parents are wearing the hats you gave out at the polo match. They're not demonstrating, and there are no signs. But if I were the Queen and Parliament, I'd try to contact someone to bring in food and sleeping bags. They aren't going anywhere.”

“There are tunnels,” Taylor said.

“Blocked and guarded by trained people. Even a rat can't get in and out of the place.

Even the phones are blocked from transmitting out. Landlines and wireless. I think you upset a few people,” Mata said. “You did a GOOD job.”

Taylor looked puzzled. “Cross section of the working class,” Mata added. “You get those that know all the underground accesses, those that know telecommunication, those that know how to build barricades and man them, such as ex-military or police people. You hit a nerve, and they responded by reacting to it. Now, they're just waiting for the next level – the next episode – to show them how to react next.”

“Oh, my. This is a scenario that I hadn't expected,” Taylor said. The quickly went to Muriel's office and turned on the main screen on the wall. And there it was.

At this time, we really don't know what's happening. Especially inside, as the feed from there was abruptly terminated. Just all of a sudden thousands of people showed up around the building. It's peaceful. Nobody is demonstrating. Nobody is holding signs. Nobody is making brave speeches. There isn't even any indication that they know we're televising this. We do understand that the Queen and the full Parliament were meeting, inside. But we have no idea how the meeting turned out. Only that it was called early this morning, and the Queen, Prince Taylor, and Ambassador Muriel put it to Parliament point blank that there would be no further harassment of the Prince.

Wait . . . wait Someone's coming out, and they're waving what appears to be someone's white shirt. He's speaking to one of the people at the front of the crowd. OH, he appears to be a reporter. Wait . . . AH! He requested that the television cameras inside be allowed to transmit.

This just in. One of our sister stations had people inside, and they televised the proceedings. Apparently, the Queen made some speech about the Prince not wanting to be harassed any more. Something about . . . OH! He had laid an ultimatum on them. Either stop the harassment or he'd abdicate his position and title, and move to America. Good Lord! He'd do that? Yes, apparently it's true. He even made it plain, himself. And Ambassador Muriel backed HIM up. OHMYGOSH! They're married! Well, she used the term consort, but it basically means the same thing. Oh, and it was done by the rules of Home. I wonder what they are and how they managed that!

A camera inside the building is transmitting now. It's bedlam in there. And the Queen is being guarded by two of the Home Regiment in their green uniforms. No weapons. Just two men. What good would that do? Charlie . . . CHARLIE! Are we able to put any of this out on the air, ourselves? We are? Then get to it, man. Sorry folks. Just some technical glitch. The type that can be cured by firing somebody. There . . . there it comes. Oh my goodness! That man just BOUNCED off something before he could even get close to the guards! Wait . . . wait . . . WHAT! Well get him up here! Quickly.

“Mata, do they have any televisions or monitors in there? I think we may want to 'divert' this cast to the people inside. If it's what I think it is, then the Queen is about to get another ultimatum. And she's definitely not going to like it,” Muriel said.

"Nope. But I can create the illusion and pipe it back," Mata replied. "And, DONE."

"Good. Thanks," Muriel said.

Ladies and gentlemen, a spokesman for the crowd, down there, is in the studio, and has said that he'd be willing to speak to us. Here he is.

The man bypassed the announcer, just taking his mic and facing the camera. My name is Fred Thompson. I'm a nobody. But the assembled people asked for someone that could speak to the rest of the country and let them know what's happening. So, here it is.

Earlier, maybe some of you saw it, the Queen addressed the massed Parliament concerning the harassment that has been active against Prince Taylor for a number of years. Following that, Prince Taylor, himself, addressed the Members of Parliament. And he laid it on the line. Either the harassment stops or he leaves. Period. Ambassador Muriel was next, and she pretty much said the same thing, but added a couple of zingers. One of them was that, if the Prince left, then we who have been trained, being a majority of the voting population, could request that Britain become an Enclave of Home, thus ousting the government.

Well, we aren't waiting. Any government that would bring a man to such straights doesn't deserve to rule. So, here it is. Either the Queen abdicates, immediately, and the entire Parliament resigns or we will contact the Leader of Home and request Enclave status. Now, I understand that this is being piped into the chamber, so I'll say it again, only directly.

Your Majesty, your time is over. Abdicate in favor of your grandson, Prince Taylor, and have the Members of Parliament issue their resignations effective immediately. Failure to Abdicate OR failure of the Members of Parliament to resign will result in an instant vote that you all be arrested for treason. And the request would then go out to Ambassador Muriel to have Britain become an Enclave. You have an hour to respond. We understand that there's a camera working in there. You don't even have to come out to tell us. Just let the reporters know, in front of the camera, and you'll be escorted out.

Thank you, sir, for allowing me to deliver the message. And he handed back the microphone, and translated out.

Taylor and Muriel just looked at each other, flabbergasted. "He didn't know about the abdication," Muriel said.

"We've got to go back," Taylor said, at the same time. Then they both laughed, and left.

Chapter 4

Confrontation Ended

(Tuesday afternoon)

A bell sounded over the front of the crowd, and Taylor and Muriel translated in just in front of them, but elevated so they could be seen. “Ladies and gentlemen – please,” Taylor said. “You may not have heard, but the Queen has already abdicated in favor of me. So, please, go home. I’ll deal with Parliament. I know where their orders were coming from, and who paid them to make the harassment. I have the hard evidence on them, and they will be prosecuted, as well as the companies that thought to rule the country through me. Please. Go home. There’s nothing more that you can do here, though I appreciate your attempt. I DO thank you for your concern and your support. But it isn’t necessary at this time. Please. Go home.” And they stood there, in the air, and watched as the crowd slowly translated out.

Muriel nudged Taylor’s mind, and got agreement in return, and they translated to the chamber. “Take her out,” Taylor said to the Regiment of Home guards. “Take her back to her home. We’ve got time to do this right. She doesn’t have to move immediately.” And the guards left with the now ex-Queen.

Then Taylor turned to the Parliament. “So, this is how you children behave, is it? Well, now the arrests begin.” And on the heels of that, several police officers appeared. “I’m going to call out names, and specify charges. As I do so, these officers will escort you to your new quarters.” And the list began. Muriel didn’t know how he was doing it until she touched his mind and realized that he was literally reading it off a list thrown up from his phone. The list seemed to go on and on. Most of the charges were for taking bribes from foreign national companies. Some of them were for outright treason. When it ended, there were very few people left in the chamber.

“You are all that’s left. The only ones that, for whatever reason, didn’t take bribes or follow the pack in their attempt to control the Crown. The crowd out front is gone. You can leave. If you wish, I will call members of the Regiment of Home to take you home. But that’s up to you. Sid,” he said and sent the last, “I need a squad to transport Members of Parliament to their homes, please.” And shortly a squad showed up, bowed to Taylor, then went to the Members to see if they’d like instant transportation.

When the last shell-shocked Member had left, Taylor turned to Muriel. “Well,” he said, “I think it’s over, now. I’ll probably have to come back tomorrow and make some sort of public statement. Perhaps my grandmother will have to do so, also. I’ll have someone contact her, and coordinate between us.” And they translated back to Muriel’s office.

“That’s tomorrow,” Muriel said. “I think you need something other than the green uniform to wear, though.”

“Hmm. Yes. I wonder if Carla might have some ideas. I really DO dislike suits,” he said.

"Then it's a good thing I was thinking ahead," Carla said as she translated in. "Come on over to my office, and we'll see what we can come up with. Oh, you're invited, too, Muriel," she added, grinning.

"I suppose, now, you'll want a Royal Warrant, to show that you're supplying clothing to the King of Britain," Taylor said with a smile.

"Naw. Too gaudy. It's enough that I know I can help my friend, Taylor, with looking like a human being," she tossed back. And he laughed.

"Oh, I LIKE that," Taylor said. "And I like that you consider me a friend, Carla. And I've been put in my place. Royally," he added, punning. "I'm still just me. VERY good. I accept. And I want you to know that I consider YOU a friend, too." And they all translated out to Carla's office.

"Here's some quick sketches. Yes, there's suits included in the batch. You don't HAVE to select them," Carla said. "I just wasn't sure what you'd like, so I did a range of sketches. Colors can change, depending on what you want, too."

"Ah! Well . . . these can be put aside, then. You have NO idea how much I dislike suits," he said. Then started examining the rest. Some, with stripes running down the outside pant-legs, he set in a second pile. The rest he looked at very carefully. "Some of these show promise, but I'm afraid that they would look too military. That's the reason," he added, "that I set aside that second batch. We'll examine them later for more formal wear. Grays and dark blues, I think, for color. Now, like this one . . . how would it look belted?"

Carla looked at the sketch, then two more appeared in her hand, one in gray and one in dark blue. And no fairy dust. "I think you're looking for something that's almost Edwardian, where the belt only goes across the front. But at least five buttons, so that the lapels are closer to your neck."

"AH! Yes. Much better. Lose the pockets, though. Simple, stylish. Yes, I can live with that. Even with the buttons. And it would look good in either blue or gray," Taylor said.

"Good. And we can scrap the ones you set aside as possible formal wear, too. Most of them are too military. Try this," she said, and handed him a sketch that showed much the same suit but with the stand-up collar and "V" shaped front panel and epaulettes. The belt went past the panel, and had a silver buckle in the center. This was in white, and the coat was fairy dusted, and the pant-legs had the blood stripe. "Oh, this is set up to allow you to use the fly plaid if you want. And wait until you see what I've got for a crown for you."

"Oh, gad! I forgot about that monstrosity. Is it too late to back out?" asked Taylor, and Muriel hit him. "OUCH! Yes, I guess it is. All right, Carla, you might as well show me." And she did.

"I agree with you about the monstrosities," she said, and handed him a circlet with a

raised front. He didn't take it.

"No offense, Carla, but I can't handle it until after the coronation. There should be no indication that I'm crowning myself. However, the design looks pretty good," he said.

"Taylor," Muriel piped up, "What about having things engraved on it. Plain is nice, but I think some sort of decoration would go over better with the people."

"Hmm. Yes. I see what you mean. We'll have to come up with something," he said. "Maybe the sort of 'fruit salad' that one sees wrapped around 'important words' on older documents. Well, we've got time. First, we need to figure out how we're going to stage it. Then get it set up someplace that's NOT a church."

"Taylor," Muriel said, "we've got another problem. How do we introduce me as your consort?"

"Good question. OK, let me settle the Media, tomorrow, then we can talk about it. Carla, the blue, the gray, and the white. I may be back for more," he said, "but let's start with them. And should I wear a hat when I'm outside?"

"NO!" both Muriel and Carla said. Carla added, "Have you SEEN what 'fashion' thinks is appropriate for men? It's worse than some of the disgusting things that women wear."

"Hey, y'all," Tex rang out. "Mata said you two were over here. Just wanted to stop by and congratulate you both. Been rootin' for you two for years. And you, Taylor. Mata tells me that your granny has dropped out, and now YOU'RE it. That ought to solve a lot of problems over there."

Taylor just stared at the man, to the point that Muriel thought she'd have to nudge him. But he beat her. "Now THAT'S a HAT!" he said.

"Oh, no you don't!" Muriel said. "You'd look like a dude cowboy. Do you KNOW what that is? It's made by the most famous and most expensive manufacturer of COWBOY hats in America. At least, that's the way it looks to me. And that style is used by the POLICE!"

"Still, it looks nice," Taylor said. "Maybe that's what we need to shake people up. And my balance doesn't show anything bad with my wearing one. I wonder what arrangements I could make with the company, if they're copyrighted."

"TAYLOR! You . . . you Grrr!" Muriel ended up growling. "You'll end up looking ridiculous."

"Of course. Can't have people taking me seriously," he replied. "That is, until I level them. But the ordinary people that aren't going to see me but maybe once a year? This would make it stick in their minds, and make me look inoffensive. Might even bring back the wearing of hats. Just let me make a phone call." And he pulled out his phone.

A couple of minutes later, a man had joined the happy throng – and the glowering Muriel – and introduced himself as a representative of the company. By this time, Taylor was wearing the dark blue outfit – he refused to call it a suit. The man simply held out his hands and a hat of the same color, but of the style that Tex wore, appeared. Taylor put it on, and it seemed to snuggle up to his head – a clear indication that it was made out of shields. Unlike Tex's hat, this one did not have the strap that went behind the head. He turned and looked at Muriel with a questioning look on his face.

“All right,” she said, grudgingly. “Yea, it sets you off apart from the crowd. But what happens when you wear the gray one?”

“It'll change to gray,” the man said. “The original manufacturer went out of business, so I bought the brand name and the copyrights. You may not recognize me, Muriel, because I only cater to men, now. But I've got the storefront next to the clothing manufacturer that helps all the trainees. This isn't the first time that I've fit a trainee. But it's got to be the most prestigious. And congratulations to both of you,” he added, smiling. “I still do business all over the world, like the original company did, but I most enjoy helping trainees. I'm one, myself. The Envoy that DID run the store works for me, now. He's good, but . . . well . . . you know they aren't really creative, usually. He found out what I wanted to do, and we merged. And as time went on, he was working for me instead of being true partners. Oh, and he's happy with the switch.”

While the man was talking, Taylor tried it – switching to the gray outfit. Sure enough, the hat switched, too. And he noted something. When he was in the dark blue he seemed to appear serious and firm. In gray, he appeared to be lighter and more fun-loving. And that was based solely on first impressions. So, as an experiment, he tried a charcoal gray, then a light gray. Sure enough, in the lighter colors he seemed to be more approachable. In the darker, he seemed somewhat grim. Finally he tried a dark brown.

“Nope. Not brown,” Carla told him. “I see what you were doing. And yes, color, or at least the hue of the fabric gives a first impression, and you might want to use that. But brown just seems to be confused and unsure. You could try a light tan, though. That might lend a seriousness to the 'approachable' look.” He did, and saw what she meant.

“It's one of the reasons that men seldom wear actual colors,” Carla noted. “Men are always trying to appear serious. The gray of the Secret Service suits is almost an exception, except that they tried for something else. Invisibility. The gray is dark enough to indicate seriousness, but it also tends to blend into the background more. It's only when you look directly at them that you get the seriousness. Colors, on the other hand, tend to push a different range of emotional responses. That's why men that DO wear colors tend to appear to be flamboyant. And no, it's not an actual response, it's a learned behavior.” Taylor looked a question at her.

She laughed. “It's because men's suits were always wool, so the colors were damped or flattened by the material. Women tended to wear cottons, silks, and later synthetic materials that had a harder cast to them. And women tended to choose colors to accentuate them. Also, the period in which suits developed was dominated by the expectancy that men

who could afford suits were serious businessmen.”

“So, you're saying that there's really nothing behind the feeling I got but learned behavior based on history?” he asked.

“Well, not nothing behind it. The Scots managed to get away with it, using the tartans. But even there, they appeared to be flamboyant compared to the British Sparrows. Some of it is the nature of colors, themselves,” Carla said. “There was an attempt during the latter half of the twentieth century, when men started wearing leisure suits in pastel colors. The fad died, quickly, because the men just weren't taken seriously when they wore them. Instead, they were considered the rich version of hippies. Now,” she added, “there is a strange reversal of all that when you wear off-white. Done right, it has a positive seriousness to it, but not the almost grim feeling of the darker shades. Tan is lighter in emotional feeling – less serious. Strange, isn't it.”

“So, that's why you made the formal wear for me as white?” he asked.

“Yep. And why I left it up to you if you want to use the fly plaid. In white, you'll stand out, but the seriousness of the outfit, itself, will tend to carry over. Part of that is because white just isn't usually worn. It gets dirty, fast. Except for us that are trained. Only the VERY rich could afford to have several white suits, and even then they were usually in cotton or such. They were meant for tropical use, or where the temperatures were much warmer than in Britain. And Britain drove the fashions during this formative period. So, it was only the very rich or very poor that traveled, and the poor just wore whatever they could get and afford.”

“Is that why Muriel always wore gray? To appear serious?” he asked.

“Likely. But also likely it was an unconscious thing. In the shade she chose for everyday, she could be serious or fun-loving as she wanted. Her formals are lighter. MUCH lighter. But with the dark red, show that she definitely has a serious edge,” Carla said. “So, now, it's become her signature. I broke her out of it, some, when you two went dancing that time – when you went as Oberon and Titania. Putting her in that blue-cast white, she became ultra formal and projected the sky and moon to your earth and sun.”

“OH! So you're saying that the colors and cloths we wore actually influenced how we behaved,” he said.

“Yep. To a degree. You two picked up on it, and carried it off, perfectly. Plus, there was tension between Oberon and Titania. Other authors have picked up on the tensions between them, and used them to shape their own novels,” Carla said. “So, clothing speaks to the nature of the individual, or the image he or she wants to project. And you've just had a fast overview of how it works in the culture you're from. Now Chun used much the same thing when she planned her squads, but she did it consciously and based on history. But historically, the Chinese WERE more flamboyant in their dress. It's only in recent history that they went to more somber coloration. And that's part of what she was striking back against.”

“And the Scots went in a different direction,” Taylor said.

"Yep. And the Irish, to a degree," Carla said. "That's part of why they were always looked down on as being different. Well, the Celts WERE different. Completely different culture than the British. The Keltoi – the kilted ones, WERE a different culture. Industrialization came to them later. And so did business. So they were considered rural, or mere peasants compared to the titans of business in Britain. They were also looked on as barbarians – wild and untamed."

"In other words, too busy living to be concerned with formalities and snobbery," Taylor said. "Like the lower middle class and poor."

"Yep. Now you've got it," she said.

"Will I ever understand it?" he asked with a sigh.

"Don't try. Just be you. Set your own standard. It's what Muriel does, and very successfully," Carla said. "I always wondered how she did it. She seemed to always just take control. And she does. She breaks all the rules. But just being her, she over-blows any of the cultural expectations. Especially when she's angry. But you can see it, too, when she is talking with children. The mothering comes out, and she projects gentleness and nurturing."

"Taylor," Muriel broke in, "if we're going to get you to Britain, tomorrow, in time for your grandmother's speech, you need to get some supper and get to sleep." Taylor noted that she was very careful to NOT say 'get to bed'. So, he just smiled, and they excused themselves and translated out.

Chapter 5

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions

(Tuesday afternoon, evening)

"I hope you don't mind," Taylor said, as she entered her casual area, "but I asked Betty if there was anything on how to be a king. It took her a bit, but she came up with what the Queen had been doing. Or at least what she was supposed to be doing. I suppose, now, there'll have to be a general election for Parliament. And I'll have to review a lot of what she signed, to be sure that it is in line with the constitution. Oh, and I suppose I'd better warn the judiciary, too, that any hanky-panky there and they'll find themselves in jail."

"Whoa, slow down, tiger. You'll wear yourself out before you've even started. One thing at a time. You've got to be declared King, first," Muriel said. "And the Queen's stuff has to be moved out of your new quarters. Besides, you haven't even told me how it went."

"Oh, that. She made her position public, and was actually much pleasanter about it than she had been. I think the fact that the weight is lifted off her shoulders might have relaxed her, some."

"Well, that's good, anyway," Muriel said with relief. "Now, about the rest of the mess"

"Well, can I at least try to think about what needs to be done?" Taylor asked.

"Make a list. Prioritize it, so you know what order it's going to happen in," Muriel suggested. "Then go through the list again, and see how much can be passed off to someone else."

"Is that how you do it?" he asked.

"Ask Mata. A LOT of what I supposedly do is actually done by others. I have Triple E to handle the companies, Legal to handle those matters"

"WAIT A MINUTE! I've got them, too! It just means breaking them out of Enclave," he said.

"No 'breakout' to it," Muriel replied. "They work for you, not the Regiment. They were just located there."

"Guards. Sid's going to love this. I wonder if he'd mind being Colonel in Chief," and he snickered.

"Yes, I would mind," Sid said, coming into the casual area. "It was bad enough trying to cover for you for short periods of time. I'm not having any of that for the long haul. Sir!"

Muriel couldn't help it. She snickered. Then she snorted. Then Mata came in and handed her a glass of that grape and berry combination, and that started it all over again. Taylor looked puzzled. Sid just looked put-upon.

When she finally calmed down, she apologized, then said, "Seriously, Taylor, I thought you had some other prospects for the position. Or you could even nominally hold the office, yourself, and just oversee the operation."

Taylor looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, "Yes. I could. Kings own, and all that."

"Well, we might have to adjust the title, some. After all, it IS the Regiment of Home," Muriel said.

"With all due respect, sir," Sid said, "I seem to remember a certain young lady that looked to be after your job. She's risen through the ranks, nicely. You might consider her for the commander. If all I had to do was take reports and pass the information on to you, it wouldn't be as bad."

"Well, if you feel she'd make the grade, then talk to her," Taylor said.

"It would be better if you did. Sir."

"Ah. Well, bring her in, then," Taylor said. And moments later a woman in a rather dirty battle dress uniform was standing at attention in front of him, and saluting.

"Sorry, sir. We were on maneuvers," she said.

"Did I take you away from something?" he asked.

"Sir, it was essentially finished. My second knows what to tell the troops, and I can get with them tomorrow to hand out congratulations and warnings," she replied.

"Ah. Good. Then you've got it covered. May I ask, though, what would you have done had I called you in while it was still going on?"

"Sir, if it were a critical point, I'd have asked for a short delay. Otherwise, I'd have come. My second knows that he could be left in charge at any point. And, in fact, I sometimes do, just to give him the experience. Critical points are where I make changes in the maneuver to see if the troops can keep up with the changes, sir," she replied. "I'd have had to pass what changes I wanted made to my second, since they can't be predicted in advance. They rely on circumstances of the maneuver."

"REALLY! Astounding. So, these are like war games?" he asked.

"Well, sir, not really. These are more like 'what if's' that we throw at the troops to see how they'd react," she said. "Much like live action sand boarding, but without live ammo."

"Amazing. And you thought this up yourself? How come you didn't pass the information up the line?" Taylor asked, and Muriel noted the hidden 'gotcha' in the question.

"Sir, we've only tried this a couple of times, and are still figuring out how to make it work. And actually, sir, it's based on things that you already do," she said. "You often change the parameters of a war game while it's in progress. And you've done the same in action, many times. This is just an extension of that, to give the troops a chance to realize that all things change in a moment, and they're expected to adapt."

"Sir, the Major has the incorrigible ones. The ones that are most apt to question authority, or disobey the rules," Sid said. "Many times, their questions or disobedience is for good reasons, but maybe misapplied. The Major volunteered to take the whole lot as part of her company. And I must say that we're seeing results from it."

"Uh, huh. Well . . . since you've been on maneuvers, you may not have been following what has been happening in the country," Taylor said. "I've been having an ongoing harassment campaign against me for years, now. And I finally found the source of the campaign. Unfortunately, it was my grandmother and Parliament. I called her out on the matter and told her that she had a choice. Either stop the harassment and issue a proclamation to make sure that Parliament knew it was over, or I would remove myself from the succession. Well, she made an announcement, and I was forced to confront Parliament, myself, and make my position plain. The upshot is that she abdicated, and Parliament went crazy. Then, the majority of the voters that are trained, showed up around the building where the meeting was held, and issued an ultimatum of their own. It included either the abdication of my grandmother and resignation of Parliament, or her arrest on criminal charges, along with all of Parliament. They didn't realize that she'd already abdicated in favor of me. Well, we went in, and I had the Queen translated out. Then, the arrests started. Parliament, now, is pretty much decimated, and I've got to take over a headless government."

"That means," he went on, "that I'd have to give up leading the Regiment. So, I'm looking for a new leader."

"Sid, sir," the Major said. "It's obvious. He's the best qualified person and the highest ranking member of the Regiment." Muriel stifled a snicker.

"Ah, well, he's already declined," Taylor said. "So, I'm looking for someone that's flexible and thinks on her feet." And Muriel had to turn a laugh into a cough. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted that Mata had placed her glass of grape and berry combination FAR out of reach. She wasn't taking any chances.

"I can't think of who might fit those requirements, sir," she said.

"I can. Major, I'm raising you to Lieutenant Colonel, and Sid to Colonel. He'll act as the Colonel in Chief of the Regiment, reporting status and concerns to me, and relaying suggestions back to you. You are, of course, always able to contact me directly, if you need to. You'll be in charge of the operation, and the one actually making the decisions," Taylor

said. "Congratulations, Colonel."

"Thank you, sir!" she said, smiling. "I'll try to do you proud."

"Now, there's only one more thing," Taylor said. "Sid? Paperwork?"

"Sir, ready to be signed, sir," Sid said, grinning.

"Ah, good. You've got both of them here," Taylor said, and signed them, handing them to the respective parties – the orders promoting them to their new ranks. "Feel free to change your insignia at your convenience." And two sets of insignia immediately changed. "You're excused, folks. And again, congratulations. You've earned it." And the two translated out.

"Well," Muriel said. "That went pretty well. Even IF Sid surprised us."

"He didn't surprise me all that much," Taylor said. "I knew he didn't like the job of being in charge of the troops. What did surprise me was the Major – sorry, Colonel now. We saw her as wanting my job way back when she first enlisted. The British Enclave was still being built at that time. And to find out that she had good ideas that look to produce positive results, well, that was the tipping point. Sid was right. She'll do well, once she shakes down in the job. However"

"Oh, oh. I can hear it coming," Muriel said.

"I've got to work out in my mind how to set up the actual coronation," Taylor said. "Obviously, the previous version is out. I won't be saddled by the Anglican church. If they do the crowning, then I'm saying that I'm subservient to them, and it would take forever to get that mess straightened out. And then there's YOUR coronation."

It was unfortunate that Mata had retrieved her glass and just taken a mouthful of the grape and berry combination. Because, with Taylor's last statement two things happened. Muriel shouted "WHAT?" And Mata proved that her aim, capacity, and propelling force were still up to par. The up side was that Ted had arrived just before that pronouncement, but was – fortunately – standing out of range.

"Well," Taylor went on, as if nothing had happened, "it is traditional for a Queen to be crowned."

"TAYLOR! . . . ," she sputtered, then said, "I'll crown you!" and a baseball bat appeared in her hands.

"Won't work," Taylor said, calmly but with a grin on his face. "Shields, dontchaknow."

"I've gone through HELL trying to figure out how to take me out of your political mess. And nearly got euchred by your grandmother. Then found a way to bypass it. And now you've got me right back in the middle of it again!" Muriel hollered.

“Yes, and I love you, too. Not only that, I LIKE you,” Taylor said.

“You can name me 'consort',” Muriel growled. “But Queen is OUT! I may not even have any children, for fear THEY'D be placed in some of the impossible positions you've had to go through. You can just field them on some poor unsuspecting girl who doesn't know any better. It wouldn't change what we have, and would certainly take care of any of the old blow-hards.”

“Muriel . . . ,” Taylor started.

“NO! I'm not having any of it. There is no 'mutual agreement' between Britain and Home. No 'joining of two great nations'. I show up as Queen, and they'll either figure that Home is now subservient to Britain – and like THAT'S going to happen – or that Home now runs Britain – and that's not going to happen, either, if I have anything to say about it!” and Muriel was sputtering in rage.

“OK, I can see that,” Taylor said. “But, how can we make sure that neither of those is going to happen, and STILL have you as my Queen?”

“I am NOT giving up being Leader of Home. They can replace me, if they want. But as long as they're following me, I'm Leading,” she growled. “Got it?”

“Of course. I wasn't talking about you giving up Leadership of Home. For one thing,” he said, “it just wouldn't be right. More happens around you than anyone else. And more inventive things come out of your leadership,” he added. “I've talked with Saul, and he agrees. You are the reason that humans and Envoys have advanced so far, and are still advancing. You are the heart and soul, if you will, of Home. You're the closest thing to royalty that they have, and they have no intention of letting you go. My question still stands, Muriel. You're the go-to person for finding ways around ANYTHING. And I want you with me.”

“I can think of one way that I could be at your coronation,” Muriel said. “But people aren't going to like it. That's if I was the one placing the crown on your head.”

“OUCH! Yea. Trouble is, it's a good idea. Particularly if you jazzed it up with some 'special effects'. Like a glow,” Taylor said. “WAIT! That's IT! YOU get crowned first – by glowing Envoys. Then the glow takes you, and you crown me.”

“Nope. Won't work. That would make me 'Queen of Home', and people would start worshiping me. NOT going to happen. Though the idea of my glowing – especially if it were bright enough that you couldn't see who I was – THAT would work,” Muriel responded. “No. No coronation for me. I don't need it. They can call me Queen if they like. But I'm simply me. Your consort. If you like, I'll place the crown on your head. There are tricks I can pull to make it very effective, and nobody will know it's me, unless they can read my signature in my shields. And I may even be able to fake them. That way, I can come in afterward and stand next to you”

“SIT next to me. I will not have it look like you have to stand in my presence,” Taylor

said. "I'd even stand as you enter, and sit when you sit. Or AFTER you sit, as that would be the polite way of seating a woman."

"All right. SIT next to you. As me, your consort. But no crown. Home HAS no royalty. The last one was a parasite, and I won't insult my friends, the Envoys, by bringing up bad memories, or even the suggestion of them," Muriel said.

"Good. Then that's settled," Taylor said. "Can we have supper, now?"

Chapter 6

Second Confrontation

(Wednesday morning)

“What's all this?” asked Muriel, entering her office.

“These people would like to see you,” Mata said. “Or, more precisely, Taylor.”

“It's a matter of extreme importance, lady. The realm MUST have a monarch, and the coronation should take place as soon as possible,” one gentleman said. “Preferably in the next three weeks. And how we're going to manage the planning for that, I have NO idea.”

“Hmm. Well, I do,” Muriel said. “Let's take this over to Legal.”

“Legal?” asked Taylor. “But”

“Nope. To what you're thinking, definitely not. Legal has a conference table. Or, if that's being used right now, then there's the room in Sam's. In fact, that might be better. We can get snacks and drinks there, and it's private,” Muriel said. Moments later, Taylor and Muriel were seated at one end of the table, and the mass of people were arranged down the sides.

“Now then, ladies and gentlemen, you seem to be overly concerned with the coronation. Why?” asked Muriel.

“Please, don't take any offense, miss, but we need to speak to Taylor. This really isn't a matter for a commoner,” a man said.

“Oops,” said Taylor. “NOT a good way to start. Gentlemen and ladies, may I introduce Muriel, Duchess of some out of the way nowhere place that no one would know about except that it happens to be the grounds of the British Enclave. Because she purchased the land for the purpose of the Regiment of Home, which also doubles as the Royal Guard, she was awarded British citizenship and the rank of Duchess. Oh, and if that isn't enough for you, she's also an American citizen and a Citizen of Home, THE Leader of Home, and Ambassador to the people of earth. She outranks me, and will even after I'm crowned. Oh, and another 'by the way', she happens to be my consort. I suggest you speak with respect to her, and value her opinions. I've seen her when she gets testy. The term 'dangerous' would be an understatement. All clear, now?”

“Now,” Muriel said, and there was venom in it, “we'll start again. And since I've been introduced it would only be polite if you told me your names as you speak. Starting with you, mister.”

“Um, I'm George Wilkinson,” he said, “and I still don't think this has anything to do with you, Your Grace. It's Prince Taylor that we need to speak to, not some mere woman.”

“Oh, dear,” Muriel said. “That’s strike two. But since this isn’t baseball . . . where do you live, Mister Wilkinson?” He gave her an address. She concentrated for a moment, then George Wilkinson suddenly wasn’t there.

“Well, he was warned,” she said, as a waiter quietly removed things from his place at the table. “I find it rather . . . um . . . upsetting when somebody refers to me as a commoner or mere girl or mere woman, as if I hadn’t a brain in my head. This isn’t the sixteenth century, and women have made amazing strides in equality to men. In some cases, surpassing them without even trying to be in competition. I’m afraid his cutting remark was rather dull.” And Taylor choked on his tea. HE’D caught the reference to a maker of razor blades that had been a sword manufacturer. In fact, he HAD a Wilkinson sword, awarded to him when he attained his knighthood. An heirloom.

“Now, I’m reminded of a movie I saw, recently, where a bunch of soldiers of the medieval period are standing around talking, and in the background another one trundles in a keg of gunpowder with a fuse in it on a two wheeled truck. The fuse is lit, and the man takes off running to place it at the gate of a castle. The fuse, unfortunately, isn’t quite long enough, and the keg blows up prematurely. And thus, as Shakespeare mentions in Hamlet, he’s hoist by his own petard. The main character in the movie turns to the rest of the soldiers and brightly says, ‘Next?’ That seems rather fitting, here, since an error in judgment caused Mister Wilkinson to similarly be removed because of his own small bomb. So. Next?”

And the group at the table looked shocked. “You DIDN’T . . .,” one said.

“What? No. He simply was returned to his home,” Muriel said. “But it should serve to let you know that I won’t put up with any more of such nonsense. Any attempts to remove me, here in my own Embassy, or comments on the traditional way of doing things could result in the individual being similarly removed from the discussion and not allowed any further voice in the matter. We are talking about the coronation of Taylor, not that of some previous monarch. He and I have already eliminated a number of obvious traditional possibilities. So, if you’ve come simply to resurrect them, you’re apt to be shot down rather quickly. And a second attempt to bring them back will result in your dismissal. I really shouldn’t have to belabor the point, but it would seem that an excessively large number of people in Britain are of the opinion that a behavior is only good if it’s origins are so lost to history that the reason for the behavior is totally unknown. This is a new age. Get your minds out of the grave of history and look to life and today’s causes and effects, and the actual circumstances surrounding the reason that you’re here.”

“I think,” Taylor said, regaining control of the conversation, or trying to, “it would be best if you understand what has already been eliminated. I will allow discussion of WHY our decisions were made. But the decisions are firm and argument against them will not be tolerated.”

“First, if you’re intending that this spectacle should take place in any sort of religious edifice, or be conducted by any clergy or other religious individual, forget it,” Taylor said. “AND if you intend to argue this point, leave now. In the past nine years since I received my

training I've been in a church exactly twice. The first time was for the wedding of a friend of the family. The second was for the funeral of a friend of mine. And, since I'm neither getting married nor dead, the possible reasons for my again being in a church are eliminated. So, on to the second."

"Wait! Wait! Are you telling us that you have no intention of marrying this woman?" one of the women in the group asked.

" 'This woman', as you call her, is my consort. Muriel has her own reasons for not being in a church, born of some very painful episodes of harassment in her own life and that of one of her friends. She is also rather leery of earthly conventions that have served to hamstring the development and evolution of human beings. I know her reasons, and quite agree. Our partnership is based on the customs and rules of Home which, may I remind you, are even older than those of earth or any of its countries. They do not involve contracts or virtual enslavement of individuals, and allow for contingencies that earthly governments don't recognize. And I suggest that in the future you, and everyone else here, start remembering that she IS of higher rank than anyone on this earth, due to her status as Leader of Home. Home is an entire world – or perhaps universe – that is far larger and more populous than earth. Talking about her as if she were simply some non-thinking object could cause you to be removed from this discussion. By me, if not by her. Is that understood?"

"But, if you're not going to marry her, how can she be your Queen?" the unfortunate woman asked, skating near the edge of the thin ice.

"Ah, point number two," Taylor said. "To be Queen in Britain suggests that there is some contractual obligation between Britain and Home. And it's not an equal contract. Either she would be seen as in the better position, and therefore Britain would simply be a satellite of Home, or she would be in a subservient position, and Home would be a satellite of Britain. Neither condition will be tolerated. However, the rules of Home make allowance for this by simply regarding a partnership as being between equal individuals. What is outside that partnership has no bearing, because there is no contract. You can either acknowledge and respect the judgment of Home in this matter, or leave. Marriage? It's not going to happen."

One older man, who looked contemplative, as if he should be smoking a pipe, then spoke up. "Maybe it would be better if we listened to what you have in mind, your Highness. I'm sure you have your reasons. And I, for one, may ask what they are but, for the purpose of moving this discussion along, will respect them and presume that the reasons have been stated. Oh, I'm sorry, I should have mentioned. My name is John Hampstead."

"Mister Hampstead . . .," Taylor began.

"John, please. Just John. I think I may even understand why your consort, Muriel, only uses one name. Titles get in the way," he said.

"Very well, John. First. No church. The whole purpose of that archaic tradition was to show that the monarch was subservient to the church. Considering the abuses that religions have caused in this and other countries, even the glimmer of any such subservience will be

eliminated. In fact, I doubt if there is any formal organization that would be acceptable. It would be better if it were somebody from outside that is simply acknowledging that the people of Britain feel that I should be their monarch. Second, I've already told you why there will be no religious or governmental contract between Muriel and I."

"Third, and this is not something that Muriel and I discussed, is the crown. The current design is obnoxious and unwieldy. And certainly any current actual crown is old, heavy, and stinks. It is also extremely old fashioned and filled with religious symbology that no longer pertains. If you can't come up with something better, then I'm sure that one of Muriel's friends can. In fact, I believe she has. Fourth, if you want a parade or procession or whatever, fine. But if the actual coronation takes longer than fifteen minutes you'll be crowning empty air. I won't tolerate one of those long winded and outrageously expensive extravaganzas that have been performed in the past," Taylor said.

"Interesting," John said. "You've managed to gut most of the points these fine people would have raised in very short order. And to good purpose, from what I can see. I do have a question – oh, not for me, really, but for the rest, here. Other than the harassment by the church, is there a reason why you avoid them, Muriel?"

"Yes, actually, there is. I am a Citizen of Home, which means that I've been there and returned alive. So I KNOW what religions only blather on about and invent. Any and every Citizen of Home has had the same experience," she said. John simply held up a green booklet, and Muriel laughed. "No wonder you said it was for the others. You know the truth."

"Yes, I do. And I wish I'd taken advantage of the opportunity years ago. However, it's a comfort to me to know that I know now," John said. "May I also ask, I remember an episode a number of years ago, when you two put on a spectacular act of Oberon and Titania. Was that when your partnership started?"

"No," Muriel said. "With no offense to Taylor, he still had some maturing to do. Well, so did I. The purpose of that little act was simply to try to pull some of the harassment that the media was inflicting on him at the behest of Parliament and the Queen, and several major companies," Muriel added. "We were friends, certainly. But it was a case of friend defending friend that that dinner date took place. It also caused our first row."

"Do you feel that he's matured, now?" asked John.

"Definitely. Oh, we still have disagreements and arguments. How not," said Muriel. "We're human. But the end result of those 'discussions' has always ended up with a mutual answer that we can both live with."

"And do you feel that YOU'RE mature?" asked John.

"Yes," Muriel replied, after a thoughtful pause. "I was placed in a different position, and was forced to 'grow up' much faster than Taylor. As a result, I've taken more courses than most people just to be able to understand myself and the world in which I was born. You were in my office, and saw the certificates on the wall. Each of those is a Doctorate level diploma.

And they were acquired over the course of nine years, many times to meet the needs of whatever crisis was going on at the moment.”

“Taylor, would you consider something like what you wore as Oberon for a crown?” asked John.

“Perhaps. Carla, one of Muriel's friends, is a designer,” Taylor said. “Muriel jokes that she's a designing woman. But the reality is that she designs everything from clothes to buildings and cars. She's also an architect and engineer. She was the one that came up with those circlets, and literally on the spur of the moment, and to fit the costumes and makeup we wore. I'm sure she could come up with something that would be appropriate without being an archaic monstrosity. In fact, she did, though I'd settle for a plain circlet.”

“Where would you hold the coronation?” asked John.

“Where ever would fit the people you feel absolutely MUST attend, and is not associated with a religion, company, organization or other group,” Taylor said. “Outside, for all of that. Envoy techniques could protect the area from whatever nature chooses to throw at us,” Taylor said. “That might even be better, as more people could attend. Even a stadium or such could be created for the occasion.”

“What sort of costume would you affect?” asked John.

“Something simple. Similar to what I have been wearing as a uniform, possibly. I've already met with Carla to hash that out,” Taylor said. And a small sound drew people's attention to the other end of the table.

A small female figure seemed to appear in an absurd distance from the table, much farther away than the wall behind the end of the table. It approached at a walking pace, growing larger as it came, until finally a young lady stood at that end of the table. The effect caused some of the delegates to gasp.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Carla,” Muriel calmly said. “The effect is similar to what the movie industry uses – I believe they call it 'blue screen'. In this case, somebody stood a distance away from Carla, and projected the image of her walking toward him – probably Jeff. Then she translated at the last minute to replace the image. Effective, isn't it? Now, imagine if the image were of a glowing entity, instead. This is what I'd imagined for Taylor's coronation. That the actual crowning would be done by that entity, walking in from behind him.”

“WOW!” said John. “And you'd get an Envoy to do that?”

“We could,” Muriel said, standing up. “Though it's an effect that anyone with the training and a bit of practice can do.” And she became a sunburst of light that totally hid who she really was. And John started laughing.

“YOU!” he finally managed. “Oh, priceless! You'd crown your consort, yourself, but in

such a way that nobody would realize that it was you. And a totally unearthly 'visitation' to show that 'this is the way it is'. You two HAVE thought this out. I'm done. There may be details to hash out, but I think we can put this together in a week, if that's all right with you. And would you then appear to sit by him?"

"From a different direction. Again, to hide who actually crowned him. He's thought he'd rise to meet me, then seat himself after I'd been seated," Muriel said, "as any gentleman would."

"Yes, and you show by that that you come to him as you, and not as Queen. Yes. I see," John said, gravely. "I think there are details that still need to be discussed. But I think you've developed a good framework." The rest of the delegates just looked shocked. "Oh, come now," he said to them. "You KNOW that, in the end, it would be me that made the decisions. That's why you asked me to join you."

"Yes," said the woman that had spoken earlier. "But we thought you'd support the traditional values!"

"You might want to be careful of that term, 'traditional'. And just because I'm a historian and antiquarian doesn't mean I can't see when tradition has become a straight jacket that doesn't suit all situations," John said. "These young people have shown us that we are living in a new world. And they have opted to break with tradition for very good reasons. The coronation is simply a declaration that the people have selected Taylor to be their monarch. This is especially important after the fiasco of a Queen and Parliament that were in thrall to multi-national corporations. By breaking with tradition, they are breaking with that past, and saying that they won't be bound by those customs which no longer are useful. I applaud their thoughtfulness and ingenuity. No pomp and circumstance. No formality to get in the way of a simple declaration. But a lot of show in a short period of time that will have people buzzing for years trying to explain what happened. And, in the more modern meaning of circumstance, they're addressing the very events that brought this course of action into being. They're setting aside the past, and addressing the future. Well done to both of them. Now, we should let them go to address the manner in which they would be dressed."

Chapter 7

Royal Designs

(Wednesday morning, later)

"If any of you wish to leave, we can provide you with a fast and reliable way of getting back to your homes," Muriel said. "You're welcome to stay, look around, enjoy the shops and restaurants, or even stay in Guest House. I've flagged all of you as guests, so it wouldn't cost you anything."

"Or, if you'd like to see your Prince decked out in finery," Carla said, "we can go to my office and show you how it's done."

"My word! That's a generous offer. And since there's no place that I HAVE to be, I'll take you both up on your offers, if you don't mind," John said.

A number of others opted to watch Carla create clothing, and some few requested transportation back to their homes. Muriel took care of that last detail first, then translated the rest to the front of the Design Studio, so they could get the full effect of the place. Then in to take seats on either side of the hall – there wasn't room for all of the people in the fitting room area.

"You'll be done, too, Muriel," Carla said, as Taylor took position beside her. "I'll get to you later."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Muriel grinned back.

"Now, Taylor, what were you thinking of for normal everyday wear?" Carla asked, playing out what had already been decided on for the sake of the dignitaries.

"Well, despite my gaudy military appearance, I do like blue. Kind of a soft, dark blue, I think," he said.

"Good. Did you have any preferences for the look?"

"NOT suits. I agree with Muriel on that. Men have been saddled with the WORST looking, most uncomfortable, least practical clothing that anyone could have thought of," he said.

"Hmm. I agree," Carla said. "There are some alternatives from British history, but they're a bit . . . well, let's just say I don't think you'd like them. Muriel, hon, can you show him the various formal wear? With pants?"

"Sure," she said. "You want them without the fly plaid, too?"

"I think so. It can always be added later, if he wants. Oh, Taylor, show her the color

blue you were thinking of,” Carla said. He did, and a moment later Muriel was standing there wearing the Montrose doublet style, but in blue. A thin dark red line ran down the outside seam of each leg. The buckle was plain silver.

“Nice. I think it would need some modification for normal wear, but that's a possibility,” Taylor said. Muriel sent him the image, and cautioned him about the differences between male and female.

“Wait,” Jeff said. “If you start with that, then you're going to have a lot of explaining to do to Muriel, tonight. Let me run the series, starting with that. Go sit down, girl. You're in the way.”

And Muriel sat, laughing. Jeff duplicated what Muriel had done, but adjusted for a man. Taylor took the image, and changed.

“Hmm,” he said, “I see that the pants are pretty much the same as my uniform pants. So, only the tunic actually changes.” A couple of minor adjustments, and the fit felt right. “I'm not sure I like the cuffs like this for everyday wear. And the jabot. Also, is there a way to accentuate the front panel without looking ridiculous?”

“In the original, the accentuation is done by buttons. We can do that, or I can do a lighter shade of the same blue – what's termed a lighter value – as an edging on the panel,” Carla said. “As for the jabot, make it wool and a lighter value. Not much. Just enough that up close it looks slightly different. The cuffs, yea, they can be reduce for everyday wear. Maybe three or four inches from the end of the sleeve, and just a hint of a point on the outside edge.”

Jeff took the idea and made it real, then passed the image to Taylor. “Yea,” Taylor said. “I think that's it. I know there's other ones. But either they have the nosedive front like a suit or panels off the bottom of the tunic. So don't bother with them. I think the formal should be a variation of this, but in an off-white, like a very pale tan, and with the full gauntlets. Let me see . . .” and suddenly, he switched.

BOY did he switch. It was white. Or at least off white with just a touch of brown. Now, instead of the lighter blue edging on the front panel of the tunic, it was the dark red to match the line on the pant legs. Not only that, but he'd done the same to the gauntlet cuffs. And the jabot was now the same red. He'd added the fly plaid with the thin red line on the outer edge, and Muriel sent him how to make it slowly billow. He'd also added his sword, which he'd omitted on the day wear.

And suddenly, the delegates realized that he WAS royal in a way that had never been made plain before. And adult. And determined to be his own man. And some of them wondered that they had the temerity to try to 'guide' him in the 'proper' path.

“I wish I had my camera with me,” John said. “That is a striking combination.”

“OK, hold on,” Carla said, and a gray drape that was almost black appeared behind

Taylor, far enough back that it didn't interfere with the fly plaid. "Taylor, would you put your left hand on the hilt, like you were trying to keep it in place, or something?"

"Ah. I know the pose you mean," he said. Carla studied the effect for a moment, then – somehow – added some lighting that created shadows. She smiled at Taylor, and he smiled back. "THAT did it," she said, and a minute later a framed picture was in John's hands.

"Now, Taylor, are you comfortable with that look and the fit of it?" asked Carla.

"I think so," he said. "If nothing else, I think it's something we can build on."

"Good. Go take a seat. It's Muriel's turn. HEE-HEE-HEE," she said, giving an evil laugh.

"Oh, oh. I think I'm in trouble," Muriel said, grinning, and went to stand near Carla.

"Before you get started, Carla, I'd like to ask Taylor a question. Sir, why the red?" John asked.

"Hmm? Oh, it's a military convention. I've been in action where I was being shot at, and did some shooting in turn. The convention is that the 'Thin Red Line' denotes action against overwhelming odds. But it's also been taken to indicate someone that's been blooded – seen action against armed forces and has had to defend himself or others. I've done both," Taylor said, quietly. "I was never the type of commander that led from behind. I was always first, and the rest of the Regiment had to hustle to keep up with me, and TRY to protect me. My shield took over a hundred hits in one action, alone."

"You've actually fought?" John asked.

"ALL of the Regiment fights. And works," Taylor said, calmly. "It was made plain to new recruits that this was to be a fighting force, and that anyone that objected shouldn't join up. The new commander of the Regiment is a woman that right off the bat we could see wanted my job. Well, she earned it, by coming up with some new training techniques that should soon be the common methods used throughout the Regiment. The startling green uniforms and the ghost horses are simply a Muriel-ism. They're meant to distract people from just how dangerous they are."

"And how dangerous ARE they?" John asked.

"We wiped out the entire People's Republic of China's military capabilities and support in a couple of hours," Taylor said, tiredly. "They'd thrown nuclear tipped missiles at the American Enclave. We stopped the missiles and destroyed them, then went after the source so they could never do it again. Thousands . . . maybe millions of Chinese military and military industrial personnel died. And I spent an hour in Home trying to regain my balance. It had to be done. But that didn't mean I had to like it, or feel proud that I did it."

"Did you regain your balance?"

"Yes. When war is declared, formally or not, then there is no guilt in defending oneself and one's nation. And the full title of the Regiment, despite what the media tries to claim, is the Regiment of Home. We are the guardians of the property and persons of Home, here on earth. Had we not acted as we did, serious damage would have occurred in America, and probably other places. And though they couldn't hurt the American Enclave, itself, it wouldn't have been safe to go outside of it, nor would visitors been able to come in."

"You left the government intact," John said as a statement.

"Yes. They were the problem of the people of China. And they dealt with it," Taylor said. "And now you're going to ask if that is our intent with Britain. No. Never. Muriel made that plain. It's up to Britain what path it will take. There was no one to take over for the government of China. Britain has more choices. It doesn't have to be me. Speaking of which, I still have nothing showing that the people of Britain want me to be their King. Now, let's watch Muriel make a fool of herself." Muriel just stuck out her tongue at him.

"OK, do you remember the Titania dress?" asked Carla.

"Of course."

"Think you can take out the silver tracery and make it the same color as Taylor's suit?"

"I think so," Muriel said and switched to the Titania dress. Then she pulled the silver off it, and made the off-white light tan instead of light blue. "Like this?"

"Yep. Now for the changes. Breast panels, lower the points and round them more. Good. Raise the neckline to between your breasts. OK, now raise the back to just under your shoulder blades. Right. NOW we can go to work," Carla said.

And so she did. The neckline was raised a bit more by simply inserting a panel between the breast panels. The look was still there, but the modesty was greater. Then Carla REALLY went to work. By making the dress slightly iridescent, it created moving shadows, particularly in the skirt when she moved, but also in the bodice as she breathed. Then the hair, and Carla had Muriel recreate the hairdo that Titania had had, without the 'fairy dust' or circlet.

Carla stood back and looked. "Something isn't right. Something's missing."

"Hold on," Jeff said. "I'm working on it. Making a flexible metal rope is harder than I thought."

"Do braided chain, instead," Carla said.

"Who's working on this? You or me?" Jeff retorted.

"ME, if you don't hurry up. What are you going to put on it?"

"This," Jeff said, and something dropped into her hand.

"O-K! I see what you're trying to do. You know how steel cable is constructed?"

"Yea, that's what I'm trying to do!" Jeff said, testily.

"OK, use smaller wire, and do a three strand twist. Three of them, then twist the three bundles you made," Carla said. Jeff tried that, and it worked. He growled at Carla, and she just laughed.

"All right, smart ass, you were right. And it makes it more flexible," he said. "NOW can we place it on her, so I know how long to make it? Please?" Carla did, and he put the cable around her neck, then held it against the triangle. A moment later, two stylized cat heads appeared and attached themselves to the top two corners of the triangle.

"Look right?" Jeff asked.

"Yep. I LOVE that faceted look you gave the triangle," Carla said, and set up a 'real view' mirror for Muriel.

"It's a cat!" Muriel said.

"Well, actually, it's supposed to be a panther," Jeff said. "Did I get it wrong?"

"Nope. Looks good. The whole outfit does," Muriel replied. "Thanks. Both of you."

"I don't think we have to ask Taylor what he thinks," Carla said. "He's got 'THAT LOOK' on his face, again. Taylor. Oh, Taylor. Come stand by your consort, in front of the drape, so I can get a good image." And like someone in a haze, he walked over to her. "Earth to Taylor. Same pose as before, please?" Absentmindedly he put his hand on the hilt of his sword, still looking at Muriel. "Hmm. I think I've found a new aphrodisiac," Carla said. "I wonder if I can package it. I might even have to censure the image." THAT finally broke his dream-like state, and he straightened up and looked toward Carla, grinning. Muriel followed suit, and it was done.

"John, would you like to exchange that picture for this one?" asked Carla.

"That IS quite a scene," he said, glancing down at the frame in his hand. "IT MOVED!"

"Of course it did. It's a short loop of when he was standing there," Carla said. She showed him the one she'd just taken.

"Would it be all right if I kept both of them?" John asked.

"Sure. They're easy enough to make," Carla said. "Just tuck them in a 'no pocket' until you get home. So, guys, you're all set."

“Not quite,” said Taylor. “I still don't know if all this work will even BE for anything. We might as well go to lunch,” he growled, and stalked out. Muriel quickly followed.

Chapter 8

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

(Wednesday afternoon)

Taylor and Muriel didn't get far. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!" his father hollered. "Your own grandmother! Were you so anxious to become King that you felt you had to remove her?"

"I didn't do anything, father. She broke the law. Repeatedly. Over the course of NINE YEARS she broke the law," Taylor said, quietly. "And you are implicated in it. Whether you agreed with her machinations or was merely a puppet to her strings, she continually harassed me to try to gain some leverage over Home by marrying Muriel. It was her intent to have Muriel subservient to Britain, thus having HOME as a part of her empire. YOU KNOW that, from the discussion in Muriel's office. I gave her every opportunity to stop the nonsense. Tried everything I could to get her to see that what she wanted was not EVER going to happen. And finally, I let grandmother know that the game was over. Either end the harassment or I'd remove myself from the succession. She finally got the point when I spoke in front of Parliament. I had to go in front of them and lay it on the line. MURIEL laid it on the line. And that's when she handed the whole thing to me."

"At that point, the people of Britain about took it out of my hands, father. I had to go and make it plain to them that she'd removed herself from the throne," Taylor said. "And it still isn't clear that I'll be the next King. However, I've begun the process of tidying up my affairs. I am no longer leader of the Regiment of Home. That's been passed to someone that is well able to handle it. And with that, there's nothing to hold me to Britain except the people themselves. It's their choice."

"And if you can't understand that the law is the law and applies to ALL people, I may be forced to turn my back on you, too," Taylor concluded. Muriel could feel the anger – the rage – building in her consort, but kept quiet. Some conflicts between parents and children just have to run their own course.

"Oh, and I'm supposed to just put up with your childish temper tantrums?" the Prince said. "Can't you behave like a man?" Taylor just looked at him. Then translated away, leaving Muriel looking at him. The Prince opened his mouth.

"Don't," Muriel said, quietly. "Just don't. You've done enough damage, already. I think you and your wife should go back to your rooms, or go home and think about what you've just done. Your son happens to love you. Well, he loved his grandmother, your mother, too. But she couldn't understand that the corporations just wanted the population of Britain enslaved to them, forced to buy their products instead of making them themselves. And you were part of it. He tried to protect her, and finally managed to succeed. He's trying to protect you, too, if you only realized it. And now you've torn him up over something that isn't even his fault. Perhaps when he calms down he'll be able to find some way to protect you both, further. But right now, I'm the only friend you have. So go back to the Guest House or to your home.

Think about what your mother has put him through. The constant harassment. Selling out to the corporations at the expense of the people of Britain. Or didn't you know that she was intending to pass a bill that would have taxed the people heavily on even things that they made for themselves? Hmm? No, don't speak. Just leave, and hope the firestorm doesn't get you, too." And Muriel translated to her apartment.

Taylor was sitting in a recliner. "I thought this is where you might have gone," she said, taking the other one.

"What do I do, Muriel," he said, quietly.

"Wait. Just wait," she replied. "We'll do what we can, but the next move isn't up to us. We have to wait until we know what's happening." And he wept. Muriel went to him and just held him. There was nothing more she could do but let him know that she was there and would support him. So, she did what had been done for her so long ago, and just wrapped him in love.

It took a bit – well, actually, about two hours – but she could feel him come out of it. The tension began to relax, and suddenly he was just 'THERE'. Muriel continued to hold him until he pushed a bit. Not pushing her away, just letting her know that he was all right.

"Sorry. I guess I'm not very good company when I'm like that," he said.

"Get it sorted out?" she asked.

"Yea. I was right. I followed your advice and checked my balance, first. Then went through the decisions I'd made along the way. They were all positive," he said. "So, out of curiosity, I checked the decisions that the trained people had made. They were a little less positive, but still to the good. I can live with that."

"Need to go Home and get rid of that judgment?" she asked.

"I don't think so. I don't think it'll come back to bite me," he replied. "Besides, things are busy, right now."

::Muriel, I hate to disturb you, but there's a delegation down here that wants to see Taylor. I've been stalling, saying he was in conference. By the way, you did good. And so did he. I could feel it. Oh, and we translated the first delegation back to their homes for you.::

::Just a second, Mata. And thanks.::

"Taylor, there's a delegation, downstairs, that wants to see you," she said.

"Yea. I felt Mata call you. I couldn't hear what she said, but I figured it was something like that. Let me change," he said, "and we can go. Maybe you should change, too." And she disentangled herself from him and did as he suggested. Then they translated to her office. Ted was in his accustomed place, and five other people were arranged around the

casual area. Taylor found his seat as Muriel assumed hers.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Well, evening, for you. What can we do for you?” asked Muriel.

“We wanted to speak to Taylor, ma'am,” one said. “We wanted to know if he wanted to be our King.”

“Well . . . ,” Taylor said, “I'd say that was up to you people. If a majority want me, then I'll do my best. I know that my grandmother abdicated in favor of me. But you don't HAVE to have me, if you don't want.”

“We're kinda the provisional government, right now,” the man said. “We can't pass bills, or stuff like that. But somebody's got to say that we want a King, and who it is we want. Oh, we aren't doing this on our own. We put it out to all the people that are trained. They all said the same thing. They want you. So, if you're willing, we'll see about setting up the crowning, now. John told us what you wanted. We can do that. Well,” he added, “except for where to do it.”

“May I make a suggestion?” asked Muriel.

“Of course, miss.”

“If there's a large field, then Envoys can set up stands and seating for people. It might take as much as a day,” Muriel said, “but they can do it.”

“Really, miss? I didn't know that they could do things like that!”

“Well, actually, with a little training in how to do it and a lot of practice, so can you,” Muriel said with a grin. “You've got the basic skills to do it. It's just on a massive scale. My squads created this office nine years ago. Five years ago, a friend of mine – human – designed and supervised the construction of the building where the signing of the China treaty was done. Then turned around and in two weeks built a complete Enclave in Russia. It can be done.”

“Then, miss, I think we need to get to it. Jake, here, has some land just outside the city he said we could use,” the man said. “Oh, I suppose I ought to introduce myself. I'm Harold Lombard. Me and John were selected to try to find out if His Majesty would consider being our King. And, being as he is, we ought to make it official as soon as possible.”

“Hello, Harold. I'm Muriel,” she said, and that started murmuring around the group.

“Lord! Miss Muriel. I'm sorry. I didn't recognize you. You've grown up a bunch since my kids got those toys of you and your friends,” he said.

“Don't worry about it. And it's just Muriel. Jacob, how about we see that property. Hold on. Carla,” she said and sent, “can you take a few minutes to see some property to

build a stadium or something on? It looks like there's going to be a coronation.” And Carla translated in.

“Sure. I'll get my squad and meet you out front. One of your's, too? And these people? No sweat. Taylor? You coming too?” she asked.

“Yes, I suppose I'd better,” he said.

“OK, Mata, if you'd join us with a squad, please?” Muriel asked.

“Already out there waiting for you. What's taking you so long? Sheesh! Children. Always something. And have you been potty? We're not stopping on the way,” Mata said, which caused snickers from the group and a laugh from Muriel.

Muriel took Taylor's hand as they went out, which caused some surprise from a few of the delegates, and fond, gentle smiles from others. “What are you thinking about?”

“Traditions. I'm going to totally shatter a lot of them. Do you realize how much religious symbology there is in the regalia of royalty?” he asked.

“Nope. Not really,” she replied. “We'll work on it.” And from the street, they translated to a large plot of land, fully large enough for three football fields, complete with the stadiums. Oh, sorry, that's British football – soccer. And Carla grinned.

“Oh, this is going to be so EASY!” she exclaimed. Muriel looked at her, aghast.

“One whole side is a hill!” Muriel said.

“Of course. That makes it a natural amphitheater. We won't have to create elaborate stands. And it wraps the audience around three sides. It's ideal!” Carla said. “Jacob, this shouldn't be up for more than a couple of weeks, and we can return it to it's original condition at the end.”

“Miss, whatever you need. This is land that's been handed down to us in the family for generations, and we couldn't ever think of what to use it for, and couldn't sell it. You aren't going to hurt it none by building here,” Jacob said. “If it suits your purposes, then I'd be happy to give it to you.”

“Oh, that won't be necessary. Just a loan for a couple of weeks. This would be a purpose built structure. It wouldn't do for anything else,” she said. “When we're done, you and I can talk about what possible uses for the land there could be.” And suddenly, there were thousands of Envoys scattered around the property. A parking lot was set in next to the road, with a wide enough turnout area to let people in without restricting traffic. And the massed group found themselves four feet up, standing on a platform that centered on the natural shape of the hill.

Behind them was a flat, black backdrop, and ten feet above it a giant screen. Two

chairs, obviously thrones, appeared on the platform, and Muriel and Taylor walked over to them. They were plain, but massive and identical. They were also, to Muriel relief and delight, padded. A sound from behind them drew their attention, and they turned around to the most amazing sight. The area was now paved in what looked like concrete. The flatter area before the hill was filled with seats, again padded, and with obvious wide aisles between areas.

As they watched, more seats started 'climbing the hill' in waves. Areas of the lower reaches of the hill had blank sections for wheelchair access. And an Envoy came toward Carla.

"How many?" Carla asked.

"Oh, about a hundred thousand. We won't have a complete count until it's over. The hill's too small to go larger. Not and make it easy access for people," she said.

"Harold, we're going to have to restrict the number of people," Carla said. "I'm sorry, but it will be televised, so the ones that can't fit here will still be able to watch."

"Oh, miss, don't be sorry. I didn't think anybody could put something like this up this fast," he said.

"Ha!" she laughed, "this is nothing. The hill is what made it possible. I thought I was going to have to create a support structure to let everyone see. I just passed the idea to the Envoys, and they took it from there. And very nicely, too."

"Carla," Muriel said. "We've got a problem. The 'apparition' is coming in from behind Taylor. There has to be room for it to put the crown on his head."

"OH! Right. Lower the backs of the thrones," Carla said. "Sorry about that. Taylor, why don't you sit down, and Muriel can you see if that would work?"

Muriel walked back to the backdrop as Taylor sat down. After a second, she started forward and raised her hands. "Put your hands up at just above head height, Taylor." He did, and she put her hands between them. He brought his hands together so his fingers touched the backs of her hands, and a spinning globe appeared. It flattened out, then suddenly a circlet appeared with a raised front. Then, the circlet/crown lowered toward his head and settled. As soon as it was firm, he removed his hands, and Muriel turned and walked back to the backdrop.

"It'll work," Muriel said. "A bit close with the thickness of the back. But if Taylor sits back I don't think it will be a problem."

"Good. And did I give YOU enough room for the runway to come meet him?"

"Good question. Let's find out. OK, Taylor, second rehearsal," she said, and translated to what looked like a bunker entrance to the stadium, but was actually meant for the cameras.

Starting from there, she calmly walked directly toward the platform, leaving the ground on the second step she took. After a moment, it was obvious that her angle of entrance was geared to put her level with the platform just before she reached it. And, as her foot touched the platform, Taylor stood and took her in his arms and kissed her, then lead her to the other throne. She sat, then he did, and they both looked out at the 'audience'.

“O-K. I see how it is. You're going to do it that way for the coronation, too, aren't you,” Carla said.

“Of course. Though, we'll probably need LOTS of rehearsals,” Muriel said, smiling at Taylor.

“Naughty, naughty, girl. You KNOW what that leads to.”

“Mmm. You think?” Muriel said, sweetly.

“Oh, girl. We've GOT to talk.”

“Talk away,” Muriel said. “Won't make any difference.”

“Might,” Carla replied. “Depends on what we talk about,” she jabbed back.

“Well, folks. We might as well go home. Things are pretty much done, here, unless we get some minor changes between now and the event,” Muriel said. “So, Herald, will this do?”

“Herald,” Taylor suddenly said, “you'll be sending out invitations, I'm sure. Get with the British Enclave, and they'll help you design them and get them out. And you'll need to consider how to get tickets to requesting individuals. And it should be that way,” he added. “Space is too limited for it to be a 'first come, first served' type of thing.”

“I'll keep that in mind, Your Majesty,” Herald said. “And thank you.” And with that the group separated, and went to their respective homes.

Chapter 9

The Event of the Decade (Saturday morning, a week later)

Ladies and gentlemen, as you know certain events in the past couple of weeks have caused this nation to seek new leadership and government. Members of Parliament will be nominated in the next month, and elections will be held as soon afterward as is practical. In the mean time we still need a leader. And by consensus of the majority of the voters of this realm, we have one. Taylor, Prince of the realm, has consented to take the reins and bring government back to behaving in a legal and just manner. Your Highness . . .

Taylor walked out toward the center of the stage, as John Hampstead went to the side with the microphone. There hadn't been time to teach John how to do without it in all the rush to make this happen. Taylor, of course, wouldn't need it. Taylor waited, at the stage center, for John to find a place to sit, then looked out at the audience.

"I was asked to come here, today, to be presented to you as your King," Taylor said, and his voice reached all the way to the back of the audience without difficulty, thanks to Muriel's training years ago. "This has to be by the will of the people. I'm not going to force myself on you. I was quite happy just playing with my Regiment." This brought chuckles from the crowd. "So, now, it's up to you. Is it your will that I take the throne as your King?"

The response was instantaneous and LOUD, "YES!" And, except for the dignitaries in the front three rows, the people were on their feet and cheering. Taylor had become popular in Britain over the nine years. He and the Regiment had done many things to raise money for hospitals, fire departments, police departments and those in need, as well as acted in several major emergencies. And always, Taylor was there working right alongside his troops. Not hanging back for media to interview him.

"Very well," Taylor said, when the crowd settled and was seated again. "Then, since you're all seated, I suppose it would be all right for me to be, too." And the crowd laughed. Taylor went to the throne and sat. "Now, there seems to be something missing," he said. "Now, in ages past, it was the Archbishop of Canterbury that would place the crown on the victims – oops, I mean new monarch's head." And there were chuckles from the crowd. "This indicated that the crown came from God, and the monarch was subject to the church. NOT going to happen. In too many ways, the church has interfered with the rights of the people and the operation of the legislature. So, I'm left without anyone to place the crown on my head. And I certainly can't do it. See?" he added, like a magician, "nothing in my hands and nothing up my sleeves." This elicited laughter.

Then, a sudden collective gasp. Something was coming. Something from very far away, even though the black backdrop was only a few steps behind Taylor. Something impossibly bright, but definitely of human shape considering the way it seemed to walk toward them. It got closer, but still the crowd couldn't make out who or what the figure was. Then, just as the figure seemed to step past the backdrop, a bell sounded, and Taylor put his hands

up to either side, just above his head. Two indistinct hands seemed to appear in front of the figure, with a spinning globe of energy between them and, when it was over Taylor's head, his hands were drawn to just touch the backs of those spectral hands. The globe began to flatten, still spinning, and change to gold. Then the spinning slowed to a stop, and a circlet hovered between the hands, then settled on Taylor's head. Taylor lowered his hands, and the figure turned and walked away. And again, as it reached the backdrop, a bell sounded and the figure disappeared. And the crowd cheered.

"Well!" Taylor said. "I guess that settles that. No hands placed the crown on my head, but it was done by your will. Very well. I'll do the best I can. And I ask you to help me. Let me know where the problems are. Let me know when things aren't right. I'll do what I can to help, and straighten things out. OK?" And the crowd cheered again. "OK, then. Looks like almost everything's been covered except for the wild rumors that have floated around for years." And Muriel walked out of the camera tunnel, stepping on air with the second step, and proceeding towards the center of the stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, because of my position, first as Prince of the Realm and now as King, there has been much speculation over who I would marry. Such a joining would imply that the woman involved would be subservient to me, and therefore to Britain. But, because of HER position, it could imply that I, and therefore Britain was actually subservient to the nation of which she was the leader," Taylor said, as Muriel sauntered along. "This has been the heart of a number of rumors and a great deal of harassment for the past nine years. The harassment has ended. I will not marry according to earthly conventions. Instead, I have taken a consort by the customs and rules of another, older and much more powerful nation. Ladies and gentlemen, Muriel, Leader of Home, has consented to be my consort, and I have consented to be hers."

And with that, Muriel stepped onto the stage, and Taylor rose and went to her. He gathered her in his arms, or he was gathered in hers, and they kissed, then he went with her to the other throne on the stage and she was seated. The crowd had again started cheering as they realized who she was, and by the time she was seated they were on their feet cheering and applauding. Taylor took the opportunity to re-seat himself as this continued on for some time. Finally, the crowd wound down.

"Ladies and gentlemen, just to make sure that it is clearly understood, there is nothing political about our being consorts," Taylor said. "There is no contract between us, or obligations of Britain to Home or Home to Britain. Muriel will have no function in the government. She is not a Queen. Traditionalist are probably panicking, now, because our relationship doesn't fit any of their ridiculous conventions. Tough. They brought their plight on themselves with their constant harassment. It's ended. Muriel and I have managed to be friends over the years despite our differences in rank. We've weathered the pressures of those that would have tried to manipulate us for their own purposes, and managed to give them what they needed without giving them a thing that they wanted. Muriel and I are consorts, and cannot and will not be manipulated, even by each other."

"Now, I think we've kept you long enough. I have a great deal of work to do, to sort out those that would destroy Britain for their own purposes. I have a government to try to rebuild,

and laws to go over to find those that would harm the people of Britain and remove them. Muriel has her own job, and has take time from it to be here, today, to help lay to rest the rumors about us. So, the formalities are over. You have what you want, a new monarch. I have what I want, someone to share my life with. And we've all had a little fun at the expense of the traditionalists. So, if you'll excuse me, there are things that need to be done that can't be done here. It's time for Muriel and I to go to work." And the two stood up, walked toward the edge of the stage, and disappeared.

"You know," Mata said as they translated into Muriel's office, "that some intrepid person is now going to put out dolls of you two, dressed as you were."

"Yep. He already did, and they're in the stores, now. Jeff didn't wait for the entrepreneurs to come up with the idea," Muriel said. "Of course, part of that is because he knew what we looked like, what we'd be wearing, and how we'd be positioned when we translated out of there. You don't REALLY think we'd miss THAT opportunity, do you?" she asked, as she switched back to her uniform and Taylor switched to the more muted and casual dark blue that he'd chosen with Carla – the somewhat Edwardian outfit.

"Well, you certainly put on quite a show. That kiss is going to be famous, you know," Mata said.

"Ah, well, they can have their fun with that," Taylor said. "The media and businesses have been put on notice that I'm on to them and won't brook any interference. And religion has been put in its place. Now, on to politics. I've got a whole bunch of laws that need to be modified, totally changed, or scrapped because of their one-sidedness. Oh, and Copyright and Patent law that I need to go over. Parliament needs to be in session before I can do much, but there ARE some things that I can do before then, by edicts. Limits I can put on some of the atrocities."

"How are you managing that?" asked Muriel.

"Computer. Jeff's design is great for this sort of thing. I simply tell it to look at existing and active laws and determine which way they're weighted, and rank them from the worst offenders, down," Taylor said. "It even highlights the passages that are offensive. And Betty came up with a very good law degree for me to help me understand some of the archaic and obfuscated language. THAT'S going to go. Laws should be clear and understandable."

"How is the judiciary reacting to your taking over?" asked Muriel.

"About how you'd expect. They've been pushing the bounds of some of the laws, to the point where some of them aren't even recognizable from their original form. I'll be sending out a warning to them, in a bit," Taylor said. "Either stick to the law, or find another profession. Twisting the law to suit businesses will land them in jail. I expect to hear a scream over that. And the Stock Market is going to get its feathers trimmed again, too."

"So, where are you going to start?"

"Oh, that's the thing," Taylor said. "It's so intertwined that it's hard to tell what to do first. I DO know that I can't do much with the laws until we have a Parliament. So, I think the Stock Market and businesses is where I'll start."

"I'm going to ask a ridiculous question, but have you considered being admitted to the bar? And does your legal education go that far?" asked Muriel.

"The degree went FURTHER than that," Taylor said. "And that's an interesting point. Monarchs used to be the 'court of last resort', which meant that they were literally judges. As laws became more complex, that fell away. Also, when monarchs became less rulers and more figureheads. You're right. If I could pass the bar exam, it would definitely shake up the judges. Especially if I could quote cases to support what I have to say. Hmm. I think I'll have Saul explore that for me, and see how I can take it."

"Taylor, I've got a touchy subject to bring up," Muriel said.

"The fact that I'm an Ambassador. I was wondering when you'd get around to that," Taylor said. "Well, can't have divided loyalties. Fortunately, the young lady that took over my position with the Regiment is one of the ones that was made an Ambassador for the purpose of administrating things like passports and such. I was considering asking you to elevate her to the position of Ambassador to Britain, and taking me out of that position."

"Well, that cures HALF the question," Muriel said, smiling. "But would it be a conflict of interest for you to remain an Ambassador in the form of a liaison between Home and the government?"

"Good question. Simple answer? I wouldn't let it be a conflict. Any conflict I could see would be hashed out between you and I before it even got to the government. So, they wouldn't even have to know about it."

"Nothing stays hidden forever."

"True. Especially now. BUT . . . I think it would still work. I wouldn't be bringing things to the government to act on as an Ambassador. It would simply be a recognition that I was authorized to talk to you about concerns," Taylor said. "In a sense, I'd be taking over the position of Secretary of State in a limited fashion, and simply because I was already familiar with the legal standing of Home and how it impacted Britain."

"GOOD answer," Muriel said, grinning. "I like it. Your new Lieutenant Colonel will need an upgrade in education for the job, but I don't see that as a problem. And it keeps you on the payroll, so you can reduce the burden on the people of Britain."

"I may be able to reduce that burden, further," Taylor said. "But I'm still working out how to go about it."

"Taylor," Mata said, coming into the casual area to speak quietly to him, "your father's here and wants to see you."

"Oh, oh," said Muriel. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No. First, this is your office. Second, I think I know what this is about, and it's best if you hear it, yourself, since it involves you," Taylor said. "It might be best, though, if you didn't say anything. Unless addressed directly. Would that be all right with you?"

"I can do that," Muriel said, pleasantly.

"OK, thanks. Mata, would you show him in, please?" asked Taylor. And moments later, the Prince was seated next to his son, though he looked askance at Muriel.

"She stays. That's what this is about, isn't it? You're worried that I'm unduly influenced by 'this woman', and won't rule fairly," Taylor said. "Unlike some, Muriel has never tried to manipulate me or influence my decisions. Yes, she HAS forced me to grow up and take responsibility for my actions. Yes, I have gotten an education courtesy of the University of Home. And yes, she's taught me how to think. Especially how to think for myself. She's my consort, not my wife in the human manner. She's a friend. She's not subject to me, nor I to her. She's my equal, personally, and the Leader of a foreign nation with which I need to interact, professionally. There is no conflict. Does that clear that up?"

". . . Yes," the Prince said. "Yes. I think it does. And I apologize for earlier. I was afraid that you WERE being manipulated by her."

"Nope. In fact the opposite was most nearly true. I tried to manipulate her, and it turned into a royal row," he said, making a pun of it. "She dressed me down, and forced me to look at the situation from both sides, and come to decisions of my own as to how to continue, or whether to break it off," Taylor added.

"Muriel, is this the way you see it?" asked the Prince.

"Yes. Definitely," Muriel said. "I won't say there won't be cross talk between us. BUT . . . I know Home and what it's goals are, and Taylor knows Britain and it's people. The only place where there would be any cross talk would be in areas where both are affected. Much like any diplomat would have to do. But more comfortably, because neither one of us have an interest in taking over the other."

"Then I owe you an apology, too, for even thinking that you were trying to manipulate him," the Prince said. "My wife read me the riot act on what my mother had been doing and was involved with. I never realized . . . well, I didn't want to know. And I didn't realize that I was being manipulated. I was surprised by how much she knew about it. But it seems that shortly after you trained Taylor she saw what mother was doing, and did some background checking. Then kept it current. SHE knew. And she knew exactly WHY Taylor issued the ultimatum, and why the people rose up against my mother and Parliament. And I would hope that you could both forgive me."

"Done," Muriel immediately said. "Partly because I don't accept apologies – only

behavior. But you need to hear the words. So, you're off the hook with me."

"And I, father. I didn't like the situation, but there was nothing I could do at the time to prove to you what had been happening," Taylor said. "I'm glad you found out. So, forget it."

"You know? You two really are suited to each other. Son, I'm beginning to think that you may possibly end up the greatest monarch that Britain has ever had," the Prince said.

"Well, history will make that judgment. Not me," Taylor said, with a somewhat ironic, forced smile. "All I can do is the best I can to clean up the mess the country is in. In fact, I was talking with Muriel about the things that needed to be done. She made a suggestion that I'm going to look into. I've got the education for it. I'm just wondering if there's a way that I could pass the bar. It would certainly put more teeth in a suggestion to Parliament if they KNEW I knew the law, and could spot what was being done to benefit only one side of the equation."

"Let me," his father said. "I know people in the bar association, and might be able to deal with that better. It hasn't been done, before. And right now they might be a bit . . . miffed with you. I think I can convince them that it's in the best interest of everyone if you were able to show that you knew the law well enough to argue it in court. And now I'd better go. You two need your own space and time to get to know each other better. And I've done what I came to do. Your mother and I will be going back to Britain, shortly. Your mother may be by, in a bit, though."

"We'll take that as a warning, and not get involved in anything that can't be broken off at a moment's notice," Muriel said, smiling and with a twinkle in her eye. The Prince laughed. Then left.

Chapter 10

Gentle Goodbyes

(Saturday afternoon)

"Taylor?" his mother said from the entrance to Muriel's office. "Your father said you might still be here."

"Hi, mum," he replied. "Come in!"

"I didn't want to disturb something," she said. "I just wanted to say how proud I was of you, this morning, and that your father and I will be going back to Britain, now. Oh, and congratulate you both on how you managed to put an end to the rumors about what would happen if you married. Between that and the spectacle you put on, you've got people all over the world talking."

"Well, that actually came out of a discussion of what we DIDN'T want, as well as a bit of outrageousness," Taylor said.

"How DID you do that? The actual crowning, I mean. It was unreal!" she asked.

"Muriel?" Taylor asked.

"Oh, I suppose. But it's not to go any further. There is a trick that those with Envoy training can do. YOU know how to translate, of course. But the 'walk in' was done by imaging. I had someone stand at a distance from me, then I walked toward them and translated at the last minute. It took a bit to get the timing right, but I had lots of help with that. And Carla and Jeff were laughing the whole time."

"That was YOU?" asked Taylor's mother.

"Yes, and that's the part that CAN'T be disclosed," Muriel said. "I did NOT place the crown on Taylor's head. NO hands touched it before it was on his head. It can't even be said that he grabbed the crown and put it on his own head. That's why his hands were outside mine."

"But . . . it didn't look like you!"

"Of course. But when I push the glow to a certain point, I'm nothing but a blob of light. Again, it's something that anybody with training can do," Muriel said. "It's just that I had the most experience doing it." She stood up, then proceeded to glow. As the glow increased, her body became indistinct, until finally she was completely unrecognizable. She turned it off and sat back down.

"I haven't seen any recordings of this morning," Muriel added, "so I don't know whether we cured the 'jump' when the image winks out because I'm no longer there, and when I

appeared in front of the backdrop.”

“Well, if it did, then I missed it,” Mata said, coming in to the casual area. “And I was looking. Carla told me about it, and I was watching to see if you'd cured it. It looked seamless. It was the sort of entrance Hollywood WISHES it could produce, outside of using computer graphics. The video from the network was posted to the Internet, and went viral.”

“The patter was good, too,” Taylor's mother said. “Light, casual, relaxed, like you were just talking to friends. I know it shocked some people with its informality. But really, you were breaking with tradition and giving very positive reasons for the break. And your entrance,” she said, turning to Muriel, “was just unreal. From the opposite direction and dressed to kill, calmly walking on air to the stage and all.”

“Yea,” Muriel said, “and I expect that the 'and all' means the kiss we gave each other. I'm sure that image will go viral, too.”

“Maybe. But it was all done so tastefully, and so definite in what it was saying that I don't think it will be used in a derogatory fashion,” his mother said.

“Well, anyway, the whole thing made a statement,” Taylor said. “I won't be a formal King. Just somebody doing a job. And Muriel won't be a Queen. Just somebody that I'm consorted with. Someone with her own job to do. Oh, dad said something about seeing if I could take the bar exam.”

“OH! Yes. He contacted his friend in the Bar Association. It's all set,” his mother said. “Are you sure that you can do this?”

“Yes,” Taylor said, with strength. “Definitely. I've probably got more knowledge of British law than most of them on the panel. I also have the ability to call up cases to reinforce points that I make that most lawyers wouldn't have without a lot of work and foreknowledge. And it's something that I need in arguing with Parliament about points of law as they start working on the laws. Any idea when the exam will be held?”

“Um . . . Monday morning, from what I understand. Your father has the details.”

“Have him send them to Mata, then,” Taylor said. “I'll be staying here for the time being, until things are settled about where I will be staying in Britain.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, 'oh', mother. What did you think a consort was?” Taylor asked.

“But . . . but then there wouldn't be any legitimate children!” she exclaimed.

“I don't see why not. All I have to do is accept the child as mine. And since I don't have any, up to this point, I don't see where that would be a problem,” Taylor said.

"But . . . some people place a great deal of emphasis on things like that," she said.

"Then it's time they either started dealing with reality or chose another King. And yes, this was one of the considerations when we elected NOT to marry," Taylor said. "This overemphasis on who did what to whom, and when, is something better relegated to the scandal sheets, not British law."

"But, wouldn't the child, then, be the heir to the Leader of Home?" she asked.

"Your Grace," Muriel interrupted, "first, my position is not a hereditary one. It's probably the most purely democratic position that there's been. I became Leader of Home because I was going in a direction that the Envoys of Home felt was good. So they followed me. Almost all of them, and now IS all of them. I didn't even know that I was Leader until some time later. I just kept doing what I do, and it's always been ratified by them. Nothing formal, like votes. Just that they keep following me. That could change at any moment, and I wouldn't have any say in the matter. So, any child from me will have to stand on his or her own feet, and make his or her own way. Nor would I have any problem with their being declared legitimate by Taylor, and raised to be rulers. Of course, they'd be raised in the Envoy training, too, which would give them an edge no matter what they do. So . . . no divided loyalties. No presumption of two hereditary offices. Just a child raised to do a job."

"Do you really think that you can make that work?" asked his mother.

"Well, if not, we dissolve the consort-ship and he can marry who he chooses," Muriel said. "I'm not going to stand in the way of what's best for him."

"Do you really think that you could do that?"

"Yes! I didn't say it wouldn't hurt. It would. I'm very fond of Taylor. But that wouldn't stop me, and wouldn't stop us from being friends. I've been through many things that have hurt, and learned to get over it and go on with my job," Muriel said, with emphasis. "I will do what I need to do, and what will hurt others the least."

"That's rather a remarkable point of view for one so young," his mother said.

"That's rather a common point of view for one that's been doing this job since she was twelve. And, it's what the balance says MUST be done without my paying a serious penalty for it in Judgment," Muriel said. "I've had to do many things, in that time, that I didn't like. But they needed to be done in order for people to be freed of the enslavement that various organizations have attempted."

"So, the ends justify the means?"

"Not even close. Nor is it that the means justify the end," Muriel said. "Life is a path with decision points along the way. At each decision, one chooses the one that would do the least harm and the most good for everyone concerned. And, with each decision, the path changes, and the potential decisions change. It's extrapolating the future from the present

with respect to the decisions one makes, and trying to make that future better. I don't know what that future is, exactly. No Utopia. Just better, day by day. Understand?"

"That seems a hard way to live," his mother said.

"Sometimes, it is. I've had my share of tears over the years," Muriel said, reflectively. "There's been some bad times when I needed the support of others just to carry on. There's also been good times. LOTS of good times, which is what keeps me going. But yea, it's hard sometimes. And sometimes that affects how I appear to others, and that bothers me to some extent. But overall it's a job I enjoy."

"And you can keep your job separate from Taylor's?" his mother asked.

"Yep. We have for nine years. This makes no difference. In fact, it's easier, now," Muriel went on. "Taylor will no longer be Ambassador to Britain. He'll still be an Ambassador, but only for the purpose of being a liaison between Britain and Home – much like a diplomat would be. His concern would be the British people, where it should be with his position as King."

"You sound like you've thought this out."

"Of course. It was always a possibility," Muriel said. "So, I took a look at that possibility and tried to find answers to all the questions I could think of. And this investigation of the possibilities started in a major way five years ago, when his grandmother started ramping up the questions and harassment. But it only came to a head when Taylor started pushing me to marry him. And that's when we had it out. What the problems were, and why I wouldn't. Then we got serious and started thinking of how we could make it work. Being consorts was the answer. Pairing off by the rules and customs of Home."

"And what are those rules and customs," asked his mother.

"I told you. There aren't any. There is no marriage in Home. People pair off for whatever reasons, including sexual where souls with human experience are concerned," Muriel said. "And, unlike on earth where marriage and pairing are so concerned with contracts and payments, there is no shame in Home. There are no contracts. There is no 'ownership' of women, so there is no 'giving in marriage'.

"And you see this as a good thing?" his mother asked, aghast.

"Of course," Muriel replied. "The whole idea of people belonging to other people is ridiculous. The only one a person can belong to is him or her self. Oh, there are good reasons to take responsibility for one's actions. If a baby results, then it needs to be taken care of, to the best of the parent's ability, until it can care for itself. Same with partners caring for each other. I understand that that's a question, here on earth. But it's one that can be solved fairly easily by people taking personal responsibility for their actions. The training gives people the incentive to practice that personal responsibility. And you've seen an example of Taylor exercising that responsibility, by eliminating the manipulation that his

grandmother and Parliament were attempting. And yes, we talked about it. And no, I did NOT influence his decision.”

“How do you know you didn't influence him?”

“Simple. His solution was one that I would have hesitated to use, in his place,” Muriel said. “It was effective. It also had some unintended consequences. One of them was that he'd be asked to take the throne. He hadn't expected that. He'd seriously believed that he was out of the line of succession, even though his grandmother hadn't yet decided. But she DID decide and the people agreed with her. So, they sent delegations to talk to Taylor and find out what he was like and how he behaved. THEY were the ones that asked him to take the throne. Even after he laid it on the line how it would be, and showed them, in rehearsal, how the coronation would go. He answered their questions, refuted their arguments, and showed them his character, and they still wanted him.”

“And you had nothing to do with it? I can't believe that,” his mother said.

“Well, I can't stop you from believing what you want. The facts are that, during those discussions, I only answered questions that I was asked. And if they had to do with him or his ability to rule, I referred them to him,” Muriel said. “Would it have made it easier for us for him to say NO? Of course. But he had the right to choose his own path. More difficult, but not impossible, and we'll both work to make it work. And that's what a partnership is all about.”

“And you intend to continue this . . . this action?”

“If you mean his being King, talk to him,” Muriel said, pointing her thumb at Taylor. “I'm only a consort. He makes his own decisions.”

“But it could affect your future children!” his mother said.

“How? They will have protection, food, shelter, and love no matter what happens,” Muriel said. “They'll also have education far beyond that normally offered in schools on earth, and choices in life that many humans DON'T have. Or at least didn't until they got trained. Or do you mean the British succession? That, too, is up to them. We can't live their lives. They'll have the training they need, if that's the course they want to take. And they'll have the opportunity to see – to REALLY see – what being a monarch is all about before they make such a decision. That's how parenting works. Or should work, anyway. Each fledgling must learn to fly it's own course. Even without an income, even without Taylor's help, even if the world economy totally collapsed, I would still be able to provide for a child or children all by myself. But I wouldn't be alone. That was just an ultimate example. I'd still have friends, both human and Envoys, that would help. And I still have a job that brings in a substantial salary. So, how would it affect any children I have?”

“Are you pregnant?” his mother abruptly asked.

“Nope. And probably won't be for a few years,” Muriel said, smiling. “Did you really think that this was a desperate action? No, I leave those for others to make. I just clean up

after their desperate actions.”

“Mother,” Taylor finally said, “I think that's enough. I appreciate your concerns, of course, but you've gone far beyond the normal limits of what a parent should ask. Muriel's been very patient with you, and answered your questions honestly. But that last one was an insult, even though she didn't take it that way. If you're thinking that I've made a partnership beneath my station, then consider that she IS the Leader of Home – a nation that is far larger and more powerful than you can ever really know. And she's the Leader by the acclimation of the people she leads, not by any fiat or vote. And, despite her saying that she could be replaced at any time, her position is more secure than mine. You've tossed your doubts at us, and we've answered. Honestly and simply answered. It's time to stop. We're both adults, now, and believe it or not we DO know what we're doing.”

His mother sighed. “Sometimes it's difficult to let go,” she said.

“I heard that nine years ago,” Muriel said. “Ask my parents how that worked out. Ask my father in particular. And ask him what changed his mind. I'll give you a clue. He saw me in action. Give your son the same respect. Watch him in action. See how he behaves. See how he's responded to. THEN, ask if it's right.”

Taylor's mother had tears in her eyes as she hugged her son, then left. Muriel sighed. Taylor wiped his face with his hands. That had been a rough one. Rougher than when his father had accused him of betraying the family. And they both knew that it wasn't over yet.

Chapter 11

Gentle Hellos

(Saturday afternoon, later)

As Muriel and Taylor were left looking at each other, a voice said, "Busy? Or can we interrupt?"

"Mom! Dad! Come on in," Muriel said.

Lily moved to Muriel and hugged her. "So, you finally did it, young lady. You finally made a decision as to who you wanted to be with. Your father and I have been gnawing our fingers down to the knuckles wondering when it would happen."

"Oh, quit being dramatic, mom. You always knew it would be him. You and your teasing about testosterone episodes," Muriel said, grinning. Lily moved away and toward Taylor.

"Now, I suppose you're too important for the mother of your consort to hug you in congratulations of your choice," Lily said.

"Not on your life," Taylor said, and reached for her. "And thank you for raising such a wonderful person."

"Oh, now! Flattery will get you everywhere," Lily replied, laughing.

"How about it, daughter? Too old to be hugged by your father?"

"Not the last time I looked, dad." And she hugged him.

"Taylor, you have my congratulations and best wishes," Fred said to the King. "And my heartfelt condolences. She's not an easy person to get along with," he added, shaking Taylor's hand.

"I know. We've had our rows. The up side is that once the conflicts are aired, we TALK about them, and find solutions. She's good at that," Taylor said. "And that's why I kept coming back to her."

"Well, good! Whatever helps keep things together," Fred said. "Oh, and congratulations on your promotion, Your Majesty."

"Please. You've called me Taylor all these years," Taylor said. "I see no reason for you to stop, now. It's just a job, after all."

"Some job! That was quite a spectacle you two put on," Muriel's father said. "That WAS you that came through the backdrop, wasn't it?"

“Um . . . ,” Muriel said.

“Oh, I know. No one's supposed to know. But I know your style, young lady,” her father said. “And that was the next generation of tricks you've pulled before. VERY well done. And your kiss . . . well, that's already famous. It's all over the news. Those two scenes, especially. You standing there behind Taylor, with the crown spinning between your hands, then it lowered down to his head, and THE KISS. Almost more famous than Rodin's beautiful sculpture. Hmm. Maybe you should do one of that.”

“DAD!”

“Now, don't you 'dad' me, young lady. That was an impressive moment. Why, I nearly cried,” he said.

“Yea, right. With relief that now I was somebody else's problem,” Muriel said, cuffing him gently.

“Well, there is that. Now HE can try to make you grow up.”

“Or out,” Muriel said, demurely. And her father blushed. “Uh, huh. I know your dirty mind, old man. Well, you'll just have to wait. No kids until things are a bit more stable for Taylor.” And the aforementioned subject of the discussion was laughing at Fred's discomfort.

“You know, dear,” Lily said, “you really shouldn't leave yourself open like that. You KNOW how dangerous it is.” And Fred growled.

“Now, young man,” Lily went on, “You know you've always been welcome in our house. Being a high and mighty King doesn't change that. You can always stop in for coffee – well, tea in your case – or to cry on our shoulders over how our daughter abuses you.” And Taylor laughed.

“If I did that, I'd be spending most of my time there, Lily,” Taylor said, still laughing. “I've always known women were complex. I never realized HOW complex until I got involved with your daughter. She could, if she wanted to, lead me around by the nose and cause me to like it. But she doesn't. She's worse. She makes ME think. Oh, the perfidy. Oh, the humanity,” he quipped, the back of one wrist on his forehead. “But seriously, I love her, and she at least appears to love me,” he added, gaining a glare from Muriel. “And that's enough for now. Well, that and the friendship we've always had.”

“You know,” Taylor added, “this is the gentlest grilling I've ever been through.”

“I see that there's no pulling the wool over your eyes,” Lily said. “Even if you're not wearing one of those old fashioned, fancy wool wigs. Well, seriously, we were a bit concerned for a while. But that ended when we saw you together on that stage. That pretty much told us where it was at. So, no grilling. Besides, I don't have any barbecue sauce with me.” Whereupon Chuck showed up with a bottle, and Lily busted up laughing.

"OK, you monster, you got me. I should know better than to say anything like that around you lot. You're as bad as our daughter."

"Where do you think we learned it from," Chuck said, grinning. "It wasn't just about shields and such that she taught us. Being outrageous is a way of life."

"Yes, it is, isn't it," Lily said, seriously. "It takes a certain mindset to do what she does. And she does it so well. Did she script your speech?" she asked Taylor.

"Nope. Purely off the cuff. The only thing scripted was the actual crowning and her approach and kiss," Taylor said. "And I think that was pretty effective. It made a brief ceremony into a spectacle. It made the whole thing worth the price for the people."

"We didn't charge them anything," Muriel said.

"Well, see? We gave them nothing, so it matched," Taylor said, and Muriel cuffed him while grinning.

"You know," Fred said, speculatively, "the fact that it was held in the open air rather than in a church or something . . . you actually made two statements, there. First, of course, was that you weren't subject to the church. But second is that it harked back to older times when the king of the harvest was crowned in a community. Of course, your reign looks to last longer than that."

"Yea," said Muriel, "and it didn't come with the other public display, thank-you-very-much." And Lily sputtered. So did Mata, only hers scored a perfect bullseye on her monitor. And Muriel casually went on, "As I understand it, the king was then expected to have intercourse with Mother Earth."

"Um," Fred said, "I don't remember that from what I read."

"Then you didn't research far enough when you went looking for zingers you could pull on me, dad," Muriel said. "Or you chose to ignore it. I did do the research. But today's society is too up tight for something like that. At least on the surface, and publicly. So, we gave it to them symbolically, with the kiss."

"So THAT'S why you did that."

"One of the reasons, dad. But only one," Muriel said. "They were looking for a Queen, too, and we just dispelled that idea. And that was the biggest reason for my second appearance and the kiss. AND being seated beside the new King. It showed them that I was a person of consequence, as a consort, but not as a Queen. I wore no crown, and accepted no accolades as such."

"You're deeper than I thought, daughter," he said.

"Of course. Girls HAVE to be. Someone in a pair has to think, and men aren't

qualified.” And Mata scored another bullseye. And glared at Muriel.

“Now, now, Mata. You know better than to take a drink when my parents are around. Where do you THINK I got it from?” Muriel asked, sweetly. “I had to learn to defend myself against dad YEARS ago.”

“Taylor,” Lily said, “this is going to sound impertinent, but where are you staying, now?”

“With Muriel, until grandmother's things can be cleared out and we have some idea of where to put them,” he said. “And yes, we're sleeping together, if that's what you were getting at.”

“Well, actually, no. We were wondering when you were going to take her half a world away from us,” Lily replied.

“To be honest? I don't know. I don't even know IF. Things are still too much up in the air,” Taylor said. “We've got to work it out between us. We thought about a lot of things, but not that one.”

“Actually,” Muriel said, “I did. Nothing's been set in place yet, since I wanted to talk to you and a few others, like Taylor, before we actually did anything. But it really doesn't matter where the Ambassador to all of earth lives. So, I could just as easily go with you, if you like. Ted can run this Enclave as well as I can, and my friends can act as a buffer for him in emergencies. So, America would still be covered. I'd just have to find a place for my squads and ever faithful and horribly put upon Mata.”

“We could find a place,” Taylor said. “I didn't think you'd want to go.”

“Well, it would be different for me, and take some getting used to,” Muriel said. “The hardest part would be FEELING that I was a long way away from mom and dad. But as we've proven so many times, distance isn't a barrier to someone that can translate.”

“We'd miss the catastrophes that occur around here without you,” her dad said.

“Yea, like a tooth ache,” Muriel said. “It would feel so good when I was gone.”

“Oh, now,” her mother said, “is that any way to be?”

“What? Honest?” Muriel asked. “It seems like I've spent my life running from one catastrophe to another. And you seem to be involved in all of them, even if just peripherally. Wouldn't it be nice to have some peace around here?”

“Well . . . ,” her father began. “Actually, no. But we knew it had to happen sooner or later. You actually held out longer than I thought you would, hon. Now, it's time for you to fly. We'll miss having you around, where we can just drop in”

“Now, just a minute,” Taylor said. “You are ALWAYS welcome to come 'drop in' on us.

If we're busy, someone will know where we are and will make you welcome. Just as they do, here. The only difference is location. And we'll make SURE you know where to go. You have been a breath of sanity in an insane world, and I value your friendship and the help you've given us. You're as much mother and father to me as you are to Muriel. And yes, I know her real history. Doesn't make any difference. YOU raised her. YOU established her personality and thirst for knowledge. And you've set me straight a few times, too. There will be blanket orders to accept you whenever you come."

"Wow," Lily said. "Taylor, we didn't mean to impose like THAT."

"No imposition. You're family. Family doesn't impose," Taylor said. "You show up, any time, and the longest you might have to wait would be if we were caught in meetings or such, just like now. I'll make sure Muriel has an office like this if I have to tear down half of London to do it."

"Actually," Fred said, "I can think of many cases where family imposes. But I think I understand what you're saying, anyway. And it's quite a complement to us. Thank you. And we're familiar with our gad-about daughter and the fact that we can never be sure where she might be at any given time. So much so, that we try to make sure that she isn't busy before we drop in. Actually, I think the most difficult part of this will be to remember the time difference between us. Easily solved, though. Just set up another clock with your time on it. We'll figure it out. However, this has strayed a long way from our reason for being here, now. We're proud of both of you. You've both come a long way, personally and professionally, to reach this point. And I think you've both thought out the potential problems you face, and done the best you can to avoid them. And certainly that ceremony should go a long way to eliminating some of them. We'll help, however we can, even if it's just supporting your stand, or being a shoulder to cry on. And, of course, you're always welcome in our home. Both of you. So, feel free to drop in. Just try to give us a little warning, because we've become gad-about, too."

"We'll do that, Fred," Taylor said.

"Singly, or together," Muriel said, "depending on who's free at the time, and as we can."

"That sounds good, dear," Lily said. "Well, husband, we ought to get out of here, and let these two have some moments of peace before they go back to fighting with people." And Lily and Fred very prosaically walked out of the office. As they left, Muriel noticed Ted was by Mata's desk.

"Ted, come in. What can I do for you?" Muriel asked.

"I just wanted to stop by and congratulate you two, and find out what's happening, now," he said.

"We were just talking about that," Muriel said, as Ted took his accustomed seat. "At the present time, it looks like you may be back in charge, here. You're the Ambassador to America," she said. Then added, "It looks like I may be moving to Britain, for some obvious

reasons, and maybe some that aren't so obvious. Oh, not immediately. We have time to set this up properly, so we aren't just dumping this on you."

"For the best, I think," Ted said. "You know, I had NO idea when I first met you how this would turn out. You've grown in some amazing ways. For a while, I was afraid that I'd pushed you into a long and lonely life. But you surprised me. You found a way, anyway. GOOD for you."

"Why, Ted! I didn't think you cared!" Muriel quipped. "Seriously? I didn't know if it was going to be a long and lonely life. I just lived it, doing the best I could at the time. In a sense, this surprised me, too. I just hope your not too upset with me for going off and deserting you."

"Nope. Nothing like that. Oh, we can work out the details, no sweat," he said. "That's trivial compared to what you two have to face, now. And Taylor, I know you've been through some rough times, especially lately. I'm sorry that you had to go through them, even though I had nothing to do with what happened. But I'm also glad that you managed to come out on top of them. I think you'll do a good job as monarch. Just from the ceremony this morning, it looks like your method will be more of a leader and less of a ruler. Is that right?"

"Actually," Taylor said, "at least at first it may be a mixture. First, people have to find out what the path I am trying to follow is all about. So, in a sense, I'll have to somewhat force them to actually look at it. Over time, though, I'd rather just do what Muriel does. Go in a direction and allow them to follow me. Oh, listening to them, of course, and their ideas and concerns. But Muriel does that, too. The people need something more than rigid formality and the obvious show for personal aggrandizement. They need to be shown a way out of the mess, and a purpose to their lives."

"Tall order. I think you've got a good start on clearing up the mess. But giving people a purpose to their lives?" asked Ted.

"Well, in a sense, I've been working on that since the beginning of the Regiment," Taylor said. "Yes, they're fighting people. But more than that, they've gone out for accidents, disasters, all sorts of stuff where they could help people, and show that they were actually friendly, and not just faceless troops. That polo match was just one version of that. The Regiment is unshakable friends to the friendly, and implacable foes to those that aren't. And I think that's working."

"Hmm. Yes. I think I see what you mean. You're trying to show the population that, with the training, they have a purpose in helping others," Ted said.

"Yes. Exactly," Taylor responded.

"Well, in any case," Ted said, "I'm glad that Muriel has found someone. And I like what you're trying to do. We can see to it that this goes as smoothly as possible on this end. Now, I think I'd better get out of here and leave you two alone." And he left.

Chapter 12

Straightening Up

(Monday morning, a week later)

"Oh, I don't want to get up," Taylor said. "It's MIDNIGHT, for crying out loud!"

"Well, you're the one that wanted to stay up late, last night," Muriel said. "But it's time to get breakfast and get going. You've got a meeting in an hour. Eight o'clock in Britain. And you said that you can't put it off."

"Yes. You're right. OK," he said. It took them almost the hour to have breakfast and get ready to go. But then it was just a step across to Britain.

"Good morning, John. I hope we're not too late," Taylor said.

"Your Majesty! . . .," John said, when Taylor interrupted.

"John, there's a time for all that nonsense, but this isn't it. I'm Taylor. Now, I know you can say it," Taylor said, gently. "I also know you don't want to. It isn't traditional. But, if we start down that road, then nothing will get done, because it isn't traditional. So, I'm just Taylor. OK?"

"Sir . . . it's hard."

"I know. But what do you call my consort?" asked Taylor.

"Why, Muriel, of course," John said.

"Of course. And, of course, she actually outranks me. Yet, she's just Muriel. Just a girl doing a job. And I'm just a guy doing a job," Taylor said. "The job doesn't involve rank. It involves getting things done. You want to help me get things done, don't you?"

"Yes. Of course. Taylor." And Taylor could see that it was an effort for his Chamberlain. But it would get easier over time.

"Good. So, where do we stand?" asked Taylor.

"We haven't found a place to put your grandmother," John said. "We were wondering if you had an idea."

"I'd say talk to her. There are castles all over the place that are used by the monarchy. One of them could be set aside for her. Find out which one she'd like to have," Taylor said.

"But . . . wouldn't that put you out?" asked John.

"Bother that! I'm too busy for all the fuss of upending myself every couple of months simply because that's the way it's always been done," replied Taylor. "If you can't talk to her, then I will. We'll get this straightened out. She needs a place. Hmm. And we need to find a position for her, to try to heal the rift between her and the people. This whole thing shouldn't end up looking like she's being shuffled off and out of the way to keep her from causing trouble. No hurry. It's waited this long, it'll wait a bit longer," Taylor said. "Now, what about Muriel. Is there a place we can use for her office?"

"Not inside the castle grounds, sir. But I believe there would be room to construct something outside, near the gate."

"Muriel?" asked Taylor.

"Where doesn't really matter to me as much as size. It needs . . . well, you saw what my office was like in America. It's large. And at that, things just manage to fit in," she said. "I'd be bringing my squads over, and they'll need the space."

"Is that absolutely necessary?" John asked. "I mean, we have adequate guards."

"Guard is only a small part of what they do. They also are display for when I'm going places. Even one squad tends to impress people," Muriel said. "There's also the on-duty squad and analysis section that handles in depth investigation of all sorts of information. And, my squads are accustomed to being with me when I'm in the office, in case anything comes up that needs all of them. It's part of the job that I do."

"But . . . Where would you house them?" asked John.

"Envoys aren't like humans, John," Muriel said. "No bodies. They don't need sleep. Actually, they don't need food, either, but I corrupted them. They DO find down time to be helpful, and that's why that large break room behind the more formal office. Sometimes seconds matter, John. And those five squads give me the seconds we need to be able to asses and deal with emergencies."

"Well, we'd have to see what we could do. I just don't know where we could put an office that large. We'd expected that you might have your secretary with you . . .," John said.

"I see," Taylor said. "John, you're thinking small. What you call her secretary is actually her security chief. She wears a lot of other hats, too, but her first and primary job is to keep Muriel safe. And she takes it seriously. As for Muriel being outside the castle, I don't see why that's necessary. Let's take a look around at what's being used for what. I know that there are many places in this complex that either aren't used, or are very seldom used, and could be turned into an office for her.

"But sir, the castle is for the use of the royals!" John exclaimed. At that point a soldier burst into the office, and pointed a gun at Muriel. Muriel just turned, smiled, and removed the rifle from him by destroying it. Seconds later, the room was flooded by troops from the Regiment of Home, and the soldier was held and cuffed, and escorted out.

The Regiment's new commander entered and saluted Taylor. "At ease, Colonel, and thank you for coming so quickly. John, you've made some fundamental errors in judgment. Perhaps you don't realize it, but by pushing that button under the lip of your desk, you just endangered the life of the soldier that was taken out of here. Muriel could just as easily have killed the man. Instead, she simply destroyed the gun. Muriel is my consort. That means that she's going to be in and out of my residence all the time. Where else would a consort be? So, I expect that her office will be readily available to not only her and I, but to outsiders. Find. A. Way."

John, by this time, was imitating a fish – his mouth opening and closing, and the only noise a kind of whimper. Finally, he said, "How . . . she was unarmed!"

"Firearms aren't really necessary, John," Muriel said, quietly. "And I think you need to think very carefully about having someone attack the Leader of Home. You see those green-clad troops around you? You know the formal name for them. The Regiment of Home. They're British citizens that have taken the Envoy training, and then volunteered to join the Regiment of the Nation that has adopted them. Why? Because it also serves the nation of their birth. And, outside in the hall, are four squads and my security chief. All Envoys. I think they'd like to have a little discussion with you about your attitude. I'll be nice. This time. I won't let them take you. This time. But John, things ARE going to change around here. Tradition is all very well, until something comes along to replace it that is better. You're standing in the way of change that could benefit all of civilization, not just the British society. So, I think you need to consider your future plans in light of who and what it was that you decided should be King of Britain."

"Taylor, why don't we find something else to do while this poor man thinks about it," Muriel said. And suddenly, the room was vacant of everyone but John.

And, in the open rectangle outside his window were two double lines of guards, following two people. On the right was a man in a strange blue suit followed by four squads of green-clad troops. On the left was a woman in a gray uniform followed by four squads of gray clad Envoys. The troops were practicing close order drill and throwing rifles at each other in synchronization. The Envoys in gray were 'panther walking'. And somehow, that made John more nervous than the Regiment troops. And John made an urgent phone call.

"Think we've given him enough of a show?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, I guess," Taylor replied, grinning. "But the troops are having SUCH fun, I hate to call a halt to it."

"Well, we're coming up on the building," Muriel replied, "and I'd hate to see the stone chipped by flying rifles."

"Good point. Colonel, if you would please?" Taylor asked.

"Sir!" she replied, and the coordinated movements ceased. Then two members of the

squads of each – Regiment and Envoys – dashed to the doors and opened them, leaving one of each type to hold the doors for their principals. The other two entered and checked the room for anything that might endanger their principals.

“This used to be used as a *salle d’armes*, until the use of swords went out of practice,” Taylor said. “If I remember right, it should be about the same size as your office. Layout is a bit different, since the windows are on the side, instead of in front. Will that matter?”

“Not to me, if we can fit. Mata?” asked Muriel.

“Can we call in Carla?” Mata asked.

“Of course. Carla,” Muriel said and sent, “could I disturb your sleep to ask you help me out?”

And a minute or so later, she arrived and said, “Ooo! Pretty. But impractical. Door's in the wrong place. Taylor, how much can we change this?”

Taylor laughed. “Feel free, Carla. I've seen what you can do. The only thing I'd suggest is that the outside blend with the rest of the structures.”

“Oh, I think we can manage that,” Carla said, and sent for her squad. “You want me to move your office here, when we're done?”

“Taylor?” asked Muriel.

“Whenever you like, love,” he responded.

“That's SO cute,” Carla said, and was hit from both sides. “Well, it IS. Muriel, girl, you picked a good one.”

“OK, go ahead and make the full move, Carla,” Muriel said. “And you can let the rest of our friends know how to find me. How long?”

“Oh, about fifteen minutes should do it. Maybe as much as a half hour. Strengthen the structure, too? It would be better if it were all shields.”

“Can you do that without disturbing people?” asked Taylor.

“Oh, sure. Same material, we just remind it of when it was shields, and what to do. That's the EASY part. Muriel,” Carla went on, “the orientation is going to be different. But I think you'll like it. Decoration, though. This isn't a desert. And do you want me to move your apartment, too?”

“I'm sure you'll come up with something that I'll like, Carla,” Muriel said. “You've known me long enough. And I don't know where you'd put my apartment.”

"Oh, there's nothing above this to speak of. There are lots of rooms that have been empty for ages. You might have to knock out some walls, but do what you think best. Oh, and Carla," Taylor said, "be sure you put the Home logo over the door. The Leader is in Residence," he added, and laughed. Carla joined him in laughter, and waived.

"Well, shall we go see what John has cooked up for us, now?" asked Muriel.

"Yes," said Taylor, and switched to the whites with the crown. And Muriel laughed, and switched to the Fighting Formals.

"Well, John," Taylor said as he entered the man's office. "You've had enough time to make your telephone calls and come to a decision?"

"Taylor," Muriel said, suddenly, "look at John. REALLY look."

"Oh, my. Well, we can cure that problem. John, I think it's time we took a little trip." And Taylor grabbed John in shields, and the three of them translated to Home. They were patient. They were even kind, and helped talk him through the ordeal, as the man had his second Judgment on Judgment Square. "And now you know," Taylor said, as John came out if it. "Now you know why we fought so hard to break the traditions that so bound you. They didn't help Britain. They held it back. Come, John. Time to go back, now." And they translated back to the Chamberlain's office.

A wall of people were outside his office when they returned. And John cried, "I was wrong! I was so wrong!" The people had guns in their hands. Guns that suddenly disappeared as both the Regimental troops and Muriel's squads destroyed them.

"Now, people, if any of you haven't made the trip home, yet, now's the time," Taylor said. Then he noticed one man that was holding his wrist. Taylor walked over to him. "Let me see it. Come on." And after a bit of coaxing, the man relented and placed his hand in Taylor's. Then watched, amazed, as destroyed tissue reformed, and pain was taken away. "There. Better?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Then it's time for a trip. Colonel, can we use your people to make the transitions?"

"Of course, sir. Honored," she said.

"Good. Be gentile with them, and bring them back sane, please. They have work to do," Taylor said.

::And NOW you understand,:: Muriel sent. ::You've just saved a bunch of people. And yes, they'll all come back. They weren't that black. Barely below mid-line. They just made some bad choices.::

::That sound a bit final from you,:: Taylor sent.

::Graduations are,:: Muriel sent back, smiling at her consort.

::Graduations?:: asked Taylor.

::You've been borderline for a while. And there may still be some rough times. But the act of fixing that man's wrist and saving those people from being killed – and without prompting – just showed that you have matured,” Muriel said. ::So, no more nagging you. You make your own decisions,:: she added, smiling at him.

Chapter 13

An Office is Born

(Monday afternoon)

“OK, people, here's how it's going to go,” Carla said. “Muriel's office fills the left side. Then here is Mata's desk, forward of Muriel's, because we're putting Fred's analysis team behind her. Doors centered on Mata's desk, as usual. On-duty squad to the right, up against the windows. Break room, kitchen and bathrooms to the right of that. NO windows in that section. Make that wall aged stone on the outside, just like the rest of the building. Windows for the on-duty squad and Muriel like the ones in America. Same sort of doors. Then work on the rest of the building so this place is secure. Lock-down shields. Nothing touches this building, or even gets within a foot. I've got some thinking to do about the decorations.”

Carla looked at the walls, and made some considerations. Then grinned. Well, it worked before. And landscape was pretty much landscape when it came to subtropical, lush landscape. And 'On the Green Meadows' was born again, with differences from her own office. And Carla chuckled. Muriel was going to hit her.

As soon as the basics were done, Carla concentrated, and the walls seemed to become three dimensional with the landscape. Even the tile floor was green. But there were no animals in clothes. And Carla grinned at the look on the Envoys faces.

“All right, people. Let's move in some furniture,” Carla said. And suddenly desks, chairs, computers, television screens and such were in place. And Fred barely noticed that he'd been moved. “I LOVE it when a plan comes together.”

The timing was perfect. Across the immaculate quad came Muriel, Taylor, and Muriel's squads. Carla went out to meet them – maybe explain why she made some of the decisions that she did, but Muriel bypassed her, drawn to the little bit of the new office that she could see through the windows and doors.

“Oh, my,” Muriel said. “You outdid yourself, here. This is like the scene in your office, but made to look even more three dimensional. Oh, and you've given my casual area more room. Oh, my. Carla, this is beautiful. Thank you.”

“Oh, and should situations change in the future, this can all be put back to the way it was, very easily. The only thing that would remain would be the strength of the building and the shields on it,” Carla said. “Oh, hey, Taylor, if you like, when the Envoys I recruited from Home are through with this building, they could go over all the structures in this complex and strengthen them. You know, build shields into the walls and create the protective barrier and such.”

“I'd love it, Carla, but I don't see how I could afford it,” Taylor said.

“I'm already being paid,” Carla said. “I'm an Ambassador, just earning my pay.”

Besides, you're family. Do I get to do your quarters, too?"

"Oh! I'd hoped you'd say that," Taylor said. "I have absolutely NO sense when it comes to that. And I really hated the upholstered museum that my grandmother had. Speaking of which, her stuff should be out by the end of the day. We had a minor boggle, or we would have been back sooner."

"I'm glad you weren't. We JUST got finished with the office. They're still going over the rest of the building," Carla said.

"Well, come to find out, some of the people that spearheaded my 'election' to the throne hadn't made the trip Home," Taylor went on. "So they didn't have the knowledge of the Judgment, or what the balance really was, and had some ulterior motives for placing me on the throne. They don't any more, and now they're Citizens of Home, and understand how their ideas would have hurt the people of Britain. So, the core group is going over their plans and scrapping most of them. In the mean time, the man that had the land? Remember him? Or maybe you never met him. No, come to think of it, you DID meet him. Anyway, he owns a warehouse that can be used to store anything that is left and can't be used. And Muriel recruited some Envoys of Home to go over the building and strengthen and clean it up. Make it environmentally neutral, so nothing will damage any of the furnishings that get moved. Then they'll move the stuff over there, as soon as you let them know what to move. So, I doubt that you'll be able to actually get in there until tomorrow."

"Tell you what," Carla said. "Unless you're busy, why don't we go back to my office and go over what you'd like to have done."

"Well, I still have to meet with John and company, and make sure they understand my position on certain things," Taylor said. "And while that's going on, if you like, I could get one of the staff to take you through the rooms so you'd have an idea of what you'd be working with."

"Sounds good. Whenever you're ready, we'll do that," she replied.

"OK, then. Muriel?" Taylor asked.

"I'm going to stay for a while, and make sure everything is set up, if you don't mind," Muriel said.

"Super. OK, Carla, I guess we can go, then," Taylor said. And they translated out.

"Mata?"

"Everything is here, Muriel. Carla added a couple extra chairs at your desk for visitors, and several extra in the casual area," Mata said. "All my stuff is here, just the way it was. On-duty is back to work. Some of the Envoys were grumbling about the selections on the television, but I told them to switch to satellite, and pull them in from there. Pop machines work. OH! That's because we're on our own converter, so no power problems. Bathrooms

work, and Chuck checked to be sure we're hooked into the converter for those. Likewise water. How about you?"

"Well, from what I can see, she even included my half-cup of coffee that I never finished," Muriel said. "And since it was from last night, I think I'll just dump it and get fresh."

"Good idea. But what about your computer?" asked Mata.

"Working fine. No problems there. PHONES! They have a different system, here," Muriel suddenly realized.

"No problem. Same provider. Us. And we're everywhere that Jeff's phones are," Mata said. "What about lawyers, or whatever they're called. We'll need British ones."

"Hmm. Good question. I wonder if we could borrow any from the British Enclave until we can get something set up. Restaurants," Muriel suddenly said. "We'll have to make sure we've got currency. Or at least credit cards that they'll accept."

"Working on it. Ours SHOULD be good," Mata said. "But I've got one of the on-duty squad checking, now."

"Is this a private party? Or can anybody crash it?" asked a voice from the door, and Alice Wilson walked in.

"Alice! What are you doing here? Problems?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. Solutions. When I knew you were moving I did a bit of research," she said. "Lawyers are two-tiered, here. Solicitors and Barristers. There's a bit of cross-over in the lower courts. But the higher courts are very rigid about it. So, I took the tests and passed. Oh, for your information, Ted's taken over overseeing Triple E. If it's really a toughy, he said he'd haul you in to handle it. Otherwise, he'll just get reports periodically and send them to you. OK?"

"Yea, sure. That works. I hate adding work to him, though," Muriel said. "I wonder if Taylor passed the test?"

"He did. I checked on that, too. Anyway, Ted said the way it's set up, it wouldn't be any work. It's all done on the Triple E side. He just uses delivering the reports as an excuse to drop by from time to time," Alice said with a grin. "Now, about lawyers. There's no offices close by. So I took the liberty of looking around for vacant land or empty buildings nearby, and checked with zoning. We can open an office about two blocks away, especially since it's not for 'commercial' use. In other words we're not handling cases for the general public for pay. So I took the liberty of buying the property and recruiting Envoys to help me set up the office. We're doing something that really should have been done before. This office will also handle international law. All the countries that have Enclaves have people to handle local law. Right now, the office consists of two secretaries, a receptionist and me." Muriel giggled.

"We're thinking of recruiting from various countries, young, hungry lawyers that want to build a good resume, mostly. And setting them up with work visas and quarters. Tough in this town, but not impossible. Further out is easier, and I even considered buying property and building a community complex for them," Alice said. "We'll see how that goes when we get a few more people. The city is being very accommodating. Good news like you travels fast."

"Um, I think the expression is 'bad news travels fast'," Muriel said.

"Yep. That's what I said. Good news LIKE YOU travels fast." and Muriel hit her.

"Goof. How long did it take for you to come up with that?" Muriel asked.

"Not long. But I've had to hang onto it for a while. No real opportunity," Alice grinned.

"MOM! She's picking on me!" Muriel said, jokingly. "Seriously, anything else you can think of?"

"Not right now. It'll take a bit to get everything set up, of course. But in the mean time I've got a good relationship with a local firm that could use the money," Alice said. "It's a small firm, and we may end up recruiting from them. Or even just bring them in."

"Well, whatever you feel is best. Oh, this office, YOU'RE in charge," Muriel said. "We didn't do that in America, because we saw the Law office as mostly being for the Enclave. No Enclave, here. So, you're it. And I'm glad to see that I've got my own lawyer again, and don't have to get used to somebody new."

"You didn't really think I'd let go of being THE lawyer to THE Leader of Home, did you?" Alice asked, grinning.

"Hello?" Lily said, translating in. "Fred and I thought we'd come see the new office. It's all the buzz all over Enclave. Carla passed back the image to your friends, Muriel, and they spread it to everyone."

"Come in!" Muriel said. "Where's dad?"

"Oh, him," Lily said. "He'll be along, sometime. He said he had some things to do, and would come over later. I think he felt that this would turn into a hen party, and he didn't want to be involved with that."

"Suggest that he come over with Ted, then," Muriel said. "I'm sure Ted would want to see the place, too. We even have his favorite chair in its proper location."

"Well, I know for fact that your friends will be over, probably tomorrow or the next day," Lily said. "They've got things they need to do, too. Or some of them do, anyway. Don's got a couple of schools he's visiting, today. Jeff's on his tour of the companies. And Marcia is trying to set up going through the SAS shoot house, whatever that is."

"SAS is Special Air Service. They're the commandos of the British empire. Like our Seals," Muriel said. "And a shoot house is where they prove their proficiency in arms – going in and taking out 'bad guys' and leaving the civilians. It's all targets. And Marcia WOULD want to go up against them. She did the same with the Seals, and really rocked them. She and her team went through individually, and ALL their scores were higher and faster than the best Seals."

"Oh, my. Yes, I can see where Marcia would want to put herself up against the best. That would help establish her credentials, wouldn't it?" asked Lily.

"Yep. Though I would have thought that they already were established. Maybe that was just for America, though," Muriel said.

"No," Lily said, "I got the impression that it was more showing off. Something about showing them how they could speed up something by using different methods."

"OH! That's because Marcia and her troops don't use guns. They use nine millimeter bullet shaped shields. No ricochet, since the shields break down as soon as they've hit something. And aim is better, because it's ALL done visually, not sighting down a barrel of a gun," Muriel said. "So, she's looking to do some training over here."

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE, YOU PEOPLE!" rang out a voice. Muriel looked out, then hollered, "Mata, two squads, NOW!" and translated.

"Don't kill them, Marcia. Just destroy the guns," she called out, as the squads circled the troops. "All right, who's in charge, here!"

"I am," an officer said. "These people have no business here."

"Oh, really," a male voice said, and Taylor was right there beside Muriel. "I think, maybe, you've got your facts mixed up, Lieutenant. I'm in charge, here. And if you wish to argue with me, I'm sure your commander would be more than happy to find the worst details for you to perform for the next year. I know that always worked in the Regiment of Home."

"Prince Taylor, Sir!"

"That's two. Would you care to try for three? We're having a special today. Three earns you a year of cleaning stables as a basic recruit," Taylor said. "Or your dishonorable discharge. Your choice. Just as a clue, Lieutenant, you might note the fancy hat."

"Y-y-y-your Majesty," the man managed to stutter out.

"Better. Much better. Now, take a look around you. First, the young lady at my side. Memorize her, Lieutenant. She'll be here a lot. Especially as she's my consort. She also happens to be Muriel, the Leader of Home," Taylor said. "Those other gray uniforms? Envoys. Two of her squads and her security chief. DEFINITELY belong here. Oh, and the ones in the red tunics? That's the Home Rescue and Recovery unit that works out of the

American Enclave. They're human, even though they manage to do things that appear to be inhuman. They also happen to be close friends of Muriel. Now, I want you and your commander in my office in a half hour. One minute over, and you'll both be discharged. Is that understood?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

"Then gather your troops and scat." They scatted. Taylor turned to Marcia, and asked, "Would it be too much of me to ask you to stay for that?"

"My pleasure, Your Majesty. And congratulations. Best dressing down I've heard, and I've heard a few," Marcia grinned. "The Seals use more profanity when they do it." And Taylor laughed. "Muriel," Marcia said, "I didn't mean to cause so much trouble. I just wanted to see your office."

"Well, you've definitely got the time to see it, now," Muriel said. "How'd the demonstration go?"

"Got a contract to train," Marcia said. "This is outside the basics, so we can charge for it. By the way, Taylor, where IS your office?"

"I don't know," he replied, grinning. "That's why I told the Lieutenant a half hour. I've got to find it." And they all busted up, laughing.

Chapter 14

An Office is Created

(Monday afternoon, later)

“Carla, this is over and above the call of duty,” Taylor said. “PLEASE, charge us something for it. Muriel's I can understand. But this is outside of something for Home.”

Carla just walked over to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, and her other hand in the air. “I hereby declare that Taylor, once known as Prince, and now as His Majesty, is my adopted brother. There. Now it's legal. I can do what I want for my brother.” Taylor just shook his head.

“Muriel, can't you do something?” he asked.

“Not me. She's bigger than me. Also more vicious,” Muriel said, laughing. “Besides, she **LIKES** designing things.”

“So. This is the room?” asked Carla. “Big enough. I think we can cure that. Will your secretary be in here?”

“According to her, yes, if I want,” Taylor replied.

“Do you hunt? And if so, what?” asked Carla.

“I've done fox. I don't anymore. It never really interested me that much,” he replied.

“OK, how about just a water color style landscape, over there. Casual area also there, your desk over here, and your secretary's desk over in this area,” Carla said, pointing out positions. “And is there any particular style of furniture you like?”

“To me, a desk is a desk,” Taylor said. “I know nothing about it. Feel free to do what you feel is right.”

“Right! OK troops. Victorian office number five and dress. Leave that wall blank. Make it strong. It's a man's office,” and her squad laughed. “Now then, what was that scene,” she said, and flipped through some pictures on her tablet. “AH! This one, I think.” She studied it for a moment, then looked at the wall. Suddenly there was a rolling meadow bordered on one side by a grove of trees. Middle distance, two figures appeared in Victorian costume, holding hands. A close look showed a remarkable resemblance to Taylor and Muriel. And just as suddenly, the room was filled in with areas of elaborate but functional furniture, including a large cupboard for supplies and filing.

“Something like that?” Carla asked.

“WOW! Just . . . WOW!” Taylor said.

"Glad we could finally use this monstrosity," Carla said. "Nobody appreciated good design. And for offices, no less. But I think this will lend you a regal air. Certainly SOMETHING should," she grinned.

"When you said that you could do this in the limited time before the meeting, I didn't realize what it meant," Taylor said. "If you want to say this was a loss-leader, feel free. But I want a firm contract with you for the rest of the residence."

"Oh, heck. This was nothing. We hurried it. We haven't even strengthened the walls, yet, beyond the basics. I'll do the rest, later. Now, what do you need from your old office?" Carla asked.

"Incidentals. I'll get with the Colonel and have them delivered. You know, I'm seriously thinking of bringing in Regiment troops to do guard duty. THEY'D never have made this mistake," Taylor said. "And I'm definitely going to initiate proficiency exams for the regulars and Life Guards. This is getting ridiculous."

"Well, it's almost time for your meeting. So, let me disappear until it's over, then we can finish the rest of the residence for you. OH, you don't HAVE to stick with Victorian, if you don't want. Just about anything British except modern would work in this room. Or a number of other styles. Some are even masculine. I'll show you some examples after your meeting," Carla said. "But this should do for now." And she left.

"Muriel, I want you to stay. There's a pair of chairs over there," he pointed. "I think we should take those and wait for the two to come in. Oh, and is Marcia available?"

"Right behind you, boss. Muriel signaled us as soon as she knew what your office would look like. Where do you want us? Or is it just me?" Marcia asked.

"Hmm. I think on Muriel's side. I have it on Carla's authority that the furniture should hold you. I'll put the commander and Lieutenant on this side, so they can get a good look at you all. Come. Sit. Anything we can get you?" asked Taylor.

"Oh, we can handle that," Marcia said. "It gives us something to do. By the way, troops, I expect that we're going to be doubted as to our abilities. Be ready to add our little trifles to our uniforms. Including the latest one."

They had just taken their seats when the secretary to the secretary brought the two men in. "Gentlemen. Come in. Sit here, please. Thank you. Now, there was a misunderstanding, earlier, that could have turned out rather tragic. The young ladies and gentlemen opposite you are members of the Home Rescue and Recovery unit, out of the American Enclave Embassy. And they happen to be friends of my Consort. They also happen to have passports issued by the Leader of Home, which means that they can go anywhere, despite their earthly citizenship. Oh, and they are deadly. Just as an exercise, they took and passed the certifications for a number of rather interesting organizations, and have the authorization to actually wear the emblems of them."

"I don't care who they think they are, or where they're from. They're not authorized entrance to this area!" the commander – a major – said.

"Really. And who would you say is authorized to tell you that they ARE authorized admittance?" asked Taylor, quietly. And Muriel could feel the rage build in him. It had not been a good day for the poor man. However, the major finally got it through his head who he was actually talking to, and had the courtesy to blanch.

"I really think, major, that your remarkable talents are wasted on mere guard duty of this castle. Though I can certainly understand where the Lieutenant got his training from. Marcia, would you be so kind as to enumerate some of the certifications you hold?"

"Certainly, Your Majesty," Marcia said. "To begin with, it's not just me that holds them. Each of the team took and passed the same certifications. The first one was for the US Navy Seals, Basic Underwater Demolition, including all the training that leads up to that designation," and the Budweiser badge appeared on their tunics. "Then there were the FBI and Secret Service," and their badges appeared on their tunics, "and yes, we're authorized by them to arrest. Followed by a number of special forces around the world," which appeared, "followed by this last one that we received this morning," and the British SAS badge appeared.

"To earn these, we had to show that we could pass the ordinary physical requirements, as well as small arms proficiency and rifle proficiency," Muriel went on. "In the case of the Seals, we also had to show that we could work underwater, and could parachute in High Altitude Low Opening conditions. We have since trained several of these organizations in techniques that require Envoy training, particularly in the use of weapons. You notice we don't carry any? We don't need to. A person shot with a nine millimeter shield is just as dead as one shot with a nine millimeter slug from a gun. And this morning, after our certification, we were contracted by the SAS to train their troops in how to do it, and a few other techniques that we developed."

"One other thing. This morning Muriel called out to me to not kill the men surrounding us," Marcia said, "but to just destroy the guns. This is a technique that ONLY those of Ambassador rank learn. We don't teach it to ordinary grunts because it IS dangerous and easily misused. Muriel, do you have something that you don't mind losing?"

"How about this?" Muriel asked, holding up a mug.

"Fine. Major, I want you to hold it in front of you on the flat of your hand. Good," Marcia said. And the cup was destroyed from the top down, slowly, to show that it wasn't just translated out somewhere. "Muriel wasn't kidding."

"Now, Major, this episode has caused me to seriously consider that proficiency examinations for ALL the armed forces might be necessary. Including and especially those involving behavior in interpersonal relationships in what might be considered diplomatic situations. All the people you see here, with the exception of my secretary and Muriel's

security chief, are Ambassadors. What your Lieutenant could have caused is a major diplomatic incident. I'm sure you understand that it's not a good thing to point guns and act discourteously toward people that have the ability to kill you with a thought. It tends to raise eyebrows in some circles. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" the Major said, still trying to recover from watching something on his hand being destroyed.

"Good. Well, there is a time for fighting, and a time for diplomacy. And in the next few days I will be talking with the commanders of all the armed forces about exactly that, and outlining suggested ways of telling the difference, and how to deal with the situations. I'm sure you'll be hearing more about that," Taylor said, and the Major could feel his insignia of rank disappearing from his shoulder.

"Sir, may I ask, would they have actually killed the men?"

"Let's put it this way, Major. You see my consort, here. Muriel, the Leader of Home? Ah, good. My dear, would you be so kind as to show him your formal wear?" asked Taylor. Muriel stood up, and switched into Fighting Formals, with the bloused boots. Then turned around, slowly, so they could see the red stripe on her pants and on the fly plaid. "Now, I know it's not a normal convention, everywhere, but both Muriel and I have earned the right to that red stripe. We've both been in dangerous situations where we have had to kill. She was twelve when she earned hers. And yet, she's the gentlest, quietest person you could hope to meet. Certainly much more so than Marcia. This isn't a game, Major. This quiet young lady commands a force that could completely wipe earth of all life, and dissolve the world into subatomic particles. And you ask if Marcia would have actually killed your men. Actually, I consider her to have been extremely diplomatic and well disciplined to have KEPT from killing your men. You may go, gentlemen. And make sure that there are no further incidents on your way out, please." The Major barely managed a salute to the King before he and the Lieutenant quick-timed out the door.

Taylor leaned back and sighed. "Well, Muriel?"

"Well what? I told you before. You graduated. You don't need my opinion," Muriel said.

"Taylor," Marcia said. "I'll offer mine. I hope I NEVER get on your bad side. That was the damndest display of a soft spoken tongue lashing that I've ever heard. And it had TEETH in it."

"By the way, young lady, I caught that 'your majesty' earlier. Is that something that can be taught?" asked Taylor.

"Sir, you definitely don't need it," Marcia replied. "That was a formal situation, and I responded formally. But we've been friends for long enough that I feel that, in private, I can call you anything I like, and you'll still realize we're friends and I respect you."

"Oh, I do. And I expect such from you. No problem. It's the distinction of WHEN to use formality and when to be casual I was talking about. Not for me. I learned it, too, but instinctively. I don't know how to teach it to others," Taylor said.

"Oh. Hmm. I don't know. I picked it up from Muriel. Betty might know. She's good at teaching," she said.

"Don't look at me, either. I started doing it rather instinctively," Muriel said.

"OK, I'll talk to Betty sometime. Or Saul. He might know," Taylor said. "Oh, and thank you all for being here. I think it did more to nail down what the situation was, diplomatically, than anything else could have."

Marcia and her troop left, after some kidding and goofing around. And Muriel walked back to her office. Her mother had left when the incident with Marcia had gone down, recognizing that Muriel was going to be busy, and not wanting to put an added burden on her. And Muriel felt lonely. Everything was different. The view she was used to for nine years was gone. The feeling of community around her was gone. The fights and fun with Ted, Bart and her friends was gone, and everything looked strange. As she reached the door, a warm, strong arm went around her shoulders and gathered her in, and just held her.

"Ted," she said, without looking.

"Yep."

"Why?"

"You needed to know that we still cared," he said. "Perfectly normal reaction to being so far from everything that you're used to. You've never really had that experience before. It isn't so much things – buildings and such – as it is the people they represent. And you put a lot into Enclave. It's only normal that you should feel lost without it. But you're really not without it. It's always there for you. Just like your home. Just like your friends that drop in unannounced. Just like Alice that followed you."

"I know. It's irrational," Muriel said.

"Yep. That's humans," Ted said. "Irrational to the nth degree. But we manage to muddle through. Give it a couple of weeks. Come visit. Have dinner out. Then come home to you man, and remember why you chose him. Oh, I don't mean visit without him. Just that you should get used to being here with him. Then get involved in the doings of Britain, and see what needs to be fixed during the day. Give yourself some focus. Heck, make another sculpture – maybe of that famous kiss." And that made Muriel snort a short laugh. "Involve yourself with your friends. With Taylor. He needs it, too."

"How come you know so much," Muriel said, finally drawing back.

"Been there. A few times. One of the reasons that I chose Arizona was because I was

too well known in the east. And that was just the last time that I had separation anxiety – what people call home sickness,” he said. “Happened a couple of other times. So, when your friends saw it in you and wanted to know what to do to help you, I came.”

“Beast. You just came to torture me with it.”

“Of course. Haven't I always found the weak spot and tried to poke it?” he asked, grinning. “Oh, one other thing. Take turns picking some place to go eat – picking some place that seems normal. You may not realize it, but he's going through some separation anxiety, too. He had the Regiment for almost as long as you had Enclave. And his previous experience with being separated was much worse than this one. He ended up in a school where the boys were apt to do some rather harsh and impolite things to smaller, weaker boys.”

“What? I . . . oh. Never mind. I get the picture,” Muriel said. “Twice, actually. You're saying that if I'm spending the time trying to help him through his separation anxiety that it will help me with mine, by taking my mind off it.”

“Yep. I knew you were smart when I first met you. Then you had to go and prove it by throwing it up in my face. Constantly,” Ted's grin was wider. “Do you have any idea how useless it makes a man feel to have a child – a GIRL child – outdo him in the first week that she's there? I was beginning to wonder if there was ANY place for me.”

“You managed.”

“Yep. Because I'd been through it before, and knew what to expect. And so did Bart, because he helped me through the first bout of it when I built Enclave,” Ted said. “That's another thing. Mata can help. Nurturers, remember?”

“Yea. I guess. OK, let me show you around the office and see what you think. And Ted? Thanks,” she said.

Chapter 16

Snowball in Summer

(Wednesday)

"It's started," Mata said.

"Oh? So soon?" asked Muriel. "I haven't even met with the Colonel, to see if she'd be willing to do something."

"Apparently, you didn't need to," Mata said. "She's been sending out squads – four at a time – to various areas of the country. They're supposedly on leave, but it's on leave with a purpose. They're going out and finding the ones that didn't complete the training, and finishing it up, then gathering them together and giving them advanced courses."

"What about passports?" asked Muriel.

"Now, THAT'S a problem. Even with the limited Ambassadors that Taylor initiated to help out in the regiment, there aren't enough to get to everyone," Mata said.

"Mata, do John and the committee have passports?" asked Muriel.

"What? I don't know! NO! They don't. John does, but not the rest."

::Taylor, is the committee up there?::

::Yes, why?::

::They don't have passports. And there are a lot of people that don't, but have been Home. Your Colonel has been busy, but she doesn't have the Ambassadors to get passports out to everyone.::

::On it,:: Taylor responded. ::I'll take care of the committee. Here's the image of the commander. Get her in, and tell her how you solved the problem, years ago.::

::Got it! Thanks, boss,:: she sent back, grinning.

::Colonel,:: Muriel sent.

::Who?::

::Muriel. Leader of Home and Ambassador to earth. Could you take some time to come to my office, please?:: Muriel gave her the image, and the Colonel translated in.

"Ma'am!"

"Relax, Colonel. You're not being called on the carpet. Come in. Sit down and relax. Can I get you some coffee or tea?" asked Muriel. "You know, I don't even know your name! Taylor always just called you nemesis. Why?"

"Oh, that. I was one of the first civilians he trained. I made the comment that I wanted his job. So he kidded me about being his nemesis. Then he pushed me, and watched me the whole time. So did Sid. So they pushed me to become Major in five years. And, for the next four, I thought that that was it – I'd never get any further. This was a surprise," the Colonel said.

"Well, actually, it was pretty much inevitable that at some time the Regiment would need a new commander," Muriel said. "I was pushing Taylor just as hard. And recently, that push accelerated. I think you understand why. Well . . . that's when the old saying, 'no good deed goes unpunished', reared up and bit me. He wanted me to be a Queen, and I refused. Ah, well, he got what he really wanted. We're consorts. Still, what do you want me to call you? I'm Muriel. And you . . . ?"

"Oh, um . . . I never really liked my name, ma'am. Just call me Jackie," she said.

"Well, Jackie, I'm Muriel. And it's much easier on both of us if you use my name instead of a title. I'm not a boss, I'm a friend. Or at least I HOPE I am. I'd like to be. Can you see me as a friend?"

"But"

"Really. You know, Taylor was the same way, at first. Here I was, the Outrageous Ambassador to earth, coming in walking on air above the crowd, and AIMED at him because he was mentally leaking and picking up thoughts from all over," Muriel said. "So I went to him and thoroughly proceeded to change his life. First, by giving him enough power to be able to shield. Then training him. And I'm afraid that I started something, then. Because of the way he looked at me, like I was something special. And never realizing that HE was something special, too. Until Ted and I made him the Ambassador to Britain, and dumped that whole load on him." Jackie was chuckling. GOOD sign, thought Muriel.

"You do realize that it's you, now. You were an Ambassador before. But now you're THE Ambassador to Britain. Taylor can't hold that position any longer. Not and be King. Too many people would think there were divided loyalties. So . . . he's still AN Ambassador, but now his function is to be the liaison between Britain and Home. Convenient that the Leader of Home is his consort, isn't it," Muriel said. "He can liaise with me whenever he wants." And that did it. The innuendo got Jackie laughing. AND blushing.

"Talk about good international relations," Jackie said. Then blushed again. "I mean"

"Don't. Don't apologize for a good comeback. And yes, I'd say they were excellent international relations," Muriel grinned. "So, is that enough? Am I Muriel, now?"

“Yes, Muriel, I think it is. I can't think of any 'boss' that would kid like that. Only someone comfortable with herself.”

“And someone that doesn't believe in the 'I give the orders and you follow them to the letter' attitude,” Muriel said. “Oh, that has it's place. Sid STILL can't call me Muriel. I'm always Ma'am to him. WITH the capital letter in place. But he's old style military. And yes, I realize that there are times when it HAS to be an 'I give the orders' attitude. I've used it, myself, in emergencies. But I've always tried to leave it open ended. That the HOW to do something is left up to those doing the job. No, I'm not telling you how to do your job. I'm telling you how I do MY job. And they're different.”

“I'm beginning to see that. And that's why you want the familiarity, is so I have input in what's going on.”

“EXACTLY! So, first, we never got you the advanced Ambassador training. And that's easily taken care of. Just let it go to your soul, and it'll open immediately. It'll give you an idea of what your job REALLY is as an Ambassador,” Muriel said. “And second, we have a problem, and I may have a solution.”

“We can't get the passports out fast enough,” Jackie said. “The troops can train, and do. But they can't hand out the passports.”

“That's the one. Well, I ran into the same problem. The military in America was training each other at such a pace that it was hard to keep up. Even doing them in batches, with Envoys recruited to help wasn't enough. So I finally put my friends to work. They were already Ambassadors, but it was pretty much an honorary title and a dodge to keep them out of jail if things went bad. So, I taught them how to create the passports and how to batch them. You've already got the Ambassadors. Your new training will show you how to batch them – how one Ambassador can train a whole bunch of people, then how they can hand out passports to all of them at once.”

“OK, so I'm going to have to play 'catch-up' a bit with the ones that are trained. That can be done.” And she thought a bit. “But you're saying to ask Envoys from Home to help. I thought that was just for emergencies!”

“Not on your life,” Mata said, coming in. “We enjoy training and helping out. We're protectors, yes, but we're also nurturers.” Jackie looked at her, in shock.

“Oh, Jackie, this is Mata, my security chief. And yes, she's an Envoy. So she knows how Envoys feel,” Muriel said. “She was MY trainer and friend. And I repay her by making her life difficult for her. Constantly.”

“I never realized. Saul and his squads always seem to keep to themselves.”

“We can cure that, too,” Muriel said. “Saul and squads should go with Taylor. So we'll see about getting you someone to be your trainer and contact directly with Home. Saul!”

"Yes Muriel," he said, translating in. "Hi, Colonel. OH! Time to go, huh? OK, no problem. As soon as you've got a good match for her, I'll feed across what I know and what we've done, and she'll be good to go."

"O-K. NOW I see what you mean by letting people handle things in their own way. It means that they know what's going on, and have the training to know what to do, and can anticipate what's needed," Jackie said. "Saul, I think I owe you an apology."

"None necessary, Colonel," he replied. "You were thrown into this rather quickly. Well, events were happening rather quickly, so it's understandable."

"It's Jackie, Saul. It should have been, for you, before. And," she said, turning to Muriel, "it should be for whoever you pick for me."

"Uh, uh," Muriel said. "I don't pick. YOU do. Would you prefer male or female?"

"Um. Female, I think. No offense, Saul. I'd just be more comfortable with a female."

"None taken, Jackie. Muriel, have you told her?"

"Not yet. Mata?" Muriel said, turning to her security chief.

"Oh GAD! Here we go again. OK, Jackie. Most Envoys have always been male. It's not a gender thing – none of the emotional and hormonal sloshing around that causes problems. It was just because the world was male oriented for a long time." And she stood up and grew, and changed. "I was Matthew. Ted asked for someone to train Muriel. Someone that could look twelve years old and female, and could be her friend. So, I changed and blew it. Things were happening so fast, that I didn't think about changing my name. So, in I come as a twelve year old girl," and she changed again, "and said, 'Hi, I'm Matt . . . uh.' REAL intelligent, wasn't it. And she RAN with it. I've been Mata ever since," and she changed back to Muriel's age and female. And Jackie roared with laughter.

"It gets worse. This sneaky little girl started asking me about Envoys, and I told her that most Envoys were male. And she asked me if it was Matt or Matthew. She KNEW! Out-thought by a twelve year old girl! The shame. The perfidy. The humiliation! And when we taught her to make her own clothes, I was there and it never occurred to me to think that she KNEW I'd been male. Until afterward. SHE KNEW AND SHE DIDN'T CARE! Because she knew, instinctively, that for Envoys male and female are just a shape." By this time Jackie was doubled over and having trouble catching her breath.

It took some time, and the discrete application of power to help Jackie come out of it. But when she'd calmed down, Muriel went on, "So, now you know. I'm an evil little monster that unmask Envoys and ends up teaching them about themselves. And makes them LIKE it."

"Oh, don't," Jackie said. "My gut still hurts." Saul reached over and touched her shoulder, and eased the pain. "Thanks, Saul. So, what's this got to do with my choosing the

Envoy?”

“Simple. YOU have to be comfortable with her. We've had pretty good luck, so far. The worst was when we paired Envoys with my friends. Some of the Envoys came in, took a look, and left. It wasn't until years later that I found out why. The kids were good, and the Envoys were good. But it wasn't a match. And the Envoys knew it,” Muriel said. “So, now, we do a better job of pairing, by selecting Envoys that are most apt to be able to match up with you. Saul?”

“Coming. Just a minute. She wants to get the look right,” he said. And the next minute a woman was standing there. The type that looks like she should be a librarian. The wallflower compared to the chick clique. Pleasant, but not a threat. Smiling, gentle, comforting.

“Hi, I'm Ernestine,” she said.

“Hello, Ernestine. I'm Jackie. Think you can put up with me?”

“Yes. No problem. Oh, I won't say we won't have our differences, but nothing more than what you'd expect in meeting someone new. Mostly, it'll be me trying to get to know you.”

“Is there a way we can make that easier?” asked Jackie.

“There is, if you're willing. If you'll link with me, mentally, then relax and let it go deep, I'll be able to read your personality and know your likes and dislikes, and make this easier. I'll also be able to anticipate when there's something you need or want, and have it ready for you,” Ernestine said.

“OK, let's try this.” And they did. At first, Jackie seemed tense. But after a bit she seemed to relax. Then she smiled and relaxed further. “I see what you mean by not being judgmental,” she said. “Yea, I can live with this. Easily. Thanks, Ernestine.”

“Oh, heck. Make it Ernie. It's easier,” she said. “OK, you've got the advanced Ambassador's training. May I suggest a few other things that might help you?” And Ernie sent a bunch of things through the link.

“Oh. Oh, my! I was right! I just didn't go far enough. Taylor's going to hate me,” Jackie said. Then blushed. “I mean, 'His Majesty',” she amended.

“No, you meant Taylor. Here, in private where we don't have to be formal, I'm Taylor. Just like before,” he said, walking in. “Sorry, love,” he said to Muriel, “I'd have been here sooner, but I was busy with the committee. We've got to wait two months to get a Parliament elected. And it may be another month after that before they're actually in session.”

“No problem. I think we've ironed out most of the problems,” Muriel said.

"Huh! I didn't know you did ironing," Taylor said. And Muriel hit him. And that set Jackie laughing again.

"OK, now I've dropped into Wonderland," she laughed. "Muriel, I'll get right on that problem of the passports. That's an elegant solution, and I probably should have thought of it before. And I think I need to get my commanders into a more relaxed situation, so they can feel that they can make suggestions. I'd better get back, now." And she and Ernie left.

"Well . . . THAT went well," Muriel said.

"I'd say you did magnificently," Taylor said. "I never saw her laugh the whole nine years that I headed the Regiment. She was always so grimly determined to succeed."

"And now you know one of my favorite things," Muriel said.

"What? Warping over people's minds?" asked Taylor, which earned him another hit.

"Well," Muriel laughed, "that and creating snowballs and watching them roll downhill. I think there's going to be some major changes in the Regiment, now. She doesn't know it, but with the changes she has in mind, the whole troop will be more like Envoys. Remember how Sid enjoyed passing out hats and water to kids? You're going to see more of that behavior from the troops, now."

"I can live with that," Taylor said, and hugged her.

Chapter 17

Politics (Thursday)

“Your Majesty,” the man said as he came in the office, “I’ll come right to the point. You are relying too much on foreign technology. To be precise, unproven foreign technology. This must stop, now. And get your doxie out of here so we can talk.”

“Hmm. I don’t believe you introduced yourself. Or who you represent,” Taylor said.

“That isn’t important. You need to learn where your bread and butter comes from – who pays your salary,” the man said. “And get her out of here.”

“Really,” Muriel said. “I think that’s the first time anyone has ever called the Leader of Home a prostitute.” And she stood up and began to glow. “And you know? I really don’t appreciate such comments. You’ve managed to outdo yourself just by walking through the door. Now, I’m going to demonstrate why it is impolite to insult the Leader of a foreign nation.” And her eyes went to glowing black. She created a shield around the man . . . and SQUEEZED. “Do I have your attention, now? Good. The first order of business is to apologize to His Majesty, Taylor the First, for your impertinent comments concerning his taste in women and ability to have a mate without having to pay for the privilege. THEN we’re going to talk. However, should you decide to continue your abysmal behavior, I’m sure we can get your identification from your body, so we know where to send it.”

“Muriel,” Taylor said, quietly. “Let him go, please.”

“Taylor?”

“Please.” She did, then discovered that Taylor had more in mind than just telling the man to leave. Suddenly, he was twice as big, glowing bright, and the black, glowing eyes had red dots in them. “I do not . . .” WHAP “. . . appreciate . . .” WHAP “. . . your insolence . . .” WHAP. The blows, delivered by using shields, were not hard. But they were hard enough to send the man reeling around the area. Taylor then held the man in position and emptied his pockets onto the floor.

Muriel picked up his wallet and read his identification. “Thomas Norcomb,” she said. “Well, Mister Norcomb, I think you’ve just discovered that the ‘foreign technology’ is something VERY proven. And, I might add, proven in battle, too.” Muriel picked up another object. “Hmm,” she said, opening the passport, “from America. On a business visa.” Then a third object was in her hands – a card case. “Uh, huh. One of the multinational corporations that was trying to take over the country.”

“Which one?” Taylor asked. Muriel showed him the card. “Oh, that one. Well, Mister Norcomb, your company has just been shut down in this country. The costs you passed on to retailers will be deducted from your company’s accounts, and the stock returned to the

company. Oh, and you?" Taylor said, and the man was stripped to his underwear and his hands were tied behind his back. Then a noose was placed around his neck. Muriel bundled up his clothes and personal effects, and bagged them. "You're going back to the company, as an example of your poor diplomatic skills. Muriel, do you have a record of these proceedings?"

"Yes. But before we send the record to the media, in all the countries where they do business, we probably ought to add his return to the company and the answer you give them." she said.

"Oh, well, that's easily done." And Taylor called in Colonel Jackie. A few words and suggestions, and a grin from her and she was gone. She was back, shortly, to say the company was shut down and the building sealed. The accounts had been corrected for the cost of the unsold products, and those products returned to the main offices of the company. She and a squad then took the unfortunate Norcomb out. When she returned, she and Muriel made contact, and Muriel made a DVD of the whole event. Jackie just grinned, saluted Taylor, and left.

"I suppose we'd better turn on the telly, now. I expect that this is going to be a 'breaking news' event," Taylor said, grinning.

"You're having entirely too much fun," Muriel said, laughing.

"Yes. Yes I am. And now I see why YOU did it," Taylor said. And they watched the report, including the entire ten minutes of the record. "Now, do you suppose that the other companies will get the point?"

"I think so," Muriel said. "Oh, by the way, your secretary is looking a bit shell shocked."

"Oh, dear. Sorry, Janice," he said. "I guess that was a bit intense. Do you need some time off?"

"Y-y-y-you g-g-g-glowed!"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. Happens, sometimes, when I'm upset," Taylor said. "Muriel does it, too, you know. But really, how else was I going to get across to the man that I was a bit perturbed by his behavior. And more so by calling my consort a doxie. Really! Rather uncivilized of him, don't you think?" Muriel understood what he was doing, having done the same many times before. He was trying to calm his secretary down to the point where she'd be safe to leave alone.

"Americans have often been accused of being uncivilized. Most of them are as civilized as anyone else. It's just the ones that think they're powerful that act like that," Muriel said. "Bullies. That's all the Ugly American ever was was bullies. Too much money. Too much thinking himself or herself to be important, and therefore to be obeyed. Well, all countries have there versions of the same thing. Isn't it a good thing that your boss isn't like that? That he has respect for you and the work you do?" Janice looked at Muriel's smiling

face.

“Janice, I know this was a shock to you,” Taylor said, and she swung back to look at him. “I wouldn’t blame you if you decided that the job was too much for you. But really, this isn’t normal behavior for me. Oh, you’re apt to see me get outrageous on a few more political and business entities as time goes on. This one was extreme simply because this was the most powerful company in the country, and the one that thought it could make policy and the crown and Parliament would have to go along with it.”

“I don’t know if you realize it, Janice,” Muriel added, and the woman’s head turned back to Muriel, “but you can grow and glow, too. It’s really just a trick. Have you ever tried?” Janice shook her head, no. “Ah. Come to my office, sometime. I’ll show you how it’s done.”

“You?” Janice whispered.

“Why not? Envoys used to do it all the time, to intimidate people. Well, we use it the same way,” Muriel said. “It’s just that with humans there’s the body and clothing to have to deal with. Envoys don’t have that problem, because what you see and feel is nothing but shields.”

“But . . . YOU teach me? You’re a Leader. I’m just a secretary,” Janice said. And this was a good sign. She was coming out of it.

“Oh, sure. My first job in the American Enclave was to be a trainer,” Muriel said. “I’ve been one ever since. Despite all the fancy titles, I’m STILL ‘just a trainer’. And, like a parent or teacher, sometimes the training involves punishing bad behavior. Then again, sometimes all that’s needed is to show the individual or entity a better way of doing things.” ::Taylor, do you think she’s able to go back to work, yet?::

::I’m not sure. What have you got in mind?::

::If she’s not ready, then why don’t I take her to my office. She’s not trained, yet. And then I’ll teach her to glow and grow, and show her some of the episodes that we’ve been involved in.::

::Hmm. Good idea. But I still need someone here.::

::Yea, but only temporarily. How about Nancy?::

::That would do, I think,:: he sent back.

“Janice, why don’t we go, now. One of my Envoys can fill in for you for a half hour or so. In fact, you’ll meet her before she comes up here. That way, she’ll know what Taylor needs to know or act on while you’re gone,” Muriel said, gently. “Come. I think you’ll enjoy it.” and she translated the two of them to her casual area. Nancy was waiting for her, and quickly got her to make contact while Muriel trickled power to her to keep her from getting a headache. She got Janice to let her know what she needed to know. And then the fun

began.

As Nancy translated into Taylor's office, there was an alert from the receptionist that the Archbishop of Canterbury was waiting in the outer office. "Have him shown in, Nancy. I KNOW what this is about. Oh, and Nancy, I may need to ask you to do something that I know most Envoys don't like doing. Would that be a problem?"

"Not to me, sir. I'm a little more flexible than that. Oh, I don't like advertising like that, but under certain circumstances I can understand the need. Just say the word, sir," she said.

Moments later, the Archbishop appeared. "Your Royal Highness" That was as far as he got before being cut off by Taylor.

"You need to keep up with the times, Bishop. The status has changed. Now, I think I know where this little discussion is going, so let me clue you in on a couple of FACTS, sir. First is that you appear to be in arrears of your taxes. Nancy, would you happen to have the figures there?"

"Approximately one hundred sixty three trillion, Your Majesty," she said. "Of course that figure doesn't count the various gifts that were given to the church over the course of your line of the monarchy."

"Of course," Taylor said to the sputtering cleric. "Does it include the income the church received from the taxes on the people?"

"Oh, no, Your Majesty. I'm afraid that I don't know how to say the amount, should that be added in," Nancy replied.

"Uh, huh. One hundred sixty three TRILLION pounds. Why, that would pay off the national debt, and provide better roads and schools for the people. In fact, just one percent would make a good start on a lot of that. Just one trillion six hundred thirty billion pounds would see this country financially better off and on the road to major recovery. I expect you'd like to make a down payment on that debt, now, wouldn't you, sir," Taylor said.

"Why you little guttersnipe! You aren't even KING! You haven't been legally crowned," the Archbishop said.

"Actually, I have, you know," Taylor said. "By the will of the people! That it wasn't a coronation sanctioned by the church should have told you something right off the bat. I am not subject to the Church of England. The Church of England is subject to Britain's people. Bishop, I'm calling in that debt. Oh, and the taxes on the people that have been paid to the church END. NOW. As do the gifts from the Crown. You have a belief," Taylor said, standing nearly nose to nose with the man and looking him in the eye. "I have knowledge. There's a difference, you know. You only believe there is a god. Have you seen him? Or her, as the case may be? Have you even seen an angel? Can you tell me what they look like? Oh, not the legends and myths. With your own eyes. Have. You. Seen. An. Angel?"

“No,” the Archbishop said, reluctantly. “No one living has.”

“Actually, MANY people have seen what you would call angels. Even you have.” By this time, Nancy was standing next to Taylor. And she started to glow, and change. Moments later a much larger, glowing male was standing there in a white robe. And then wings appeared. Not just one pair, but a number that was uncountable due to their movement. Wings that nearly covered her body. “Many people have seen us, and never recognized us,” she went on. “And we know what His Majesty, Taylor knows. Would you care to know? Would you dare to come with me to Home and see for yourself? Would you dare the Judgment you call final? As your King has dared? Would you even survive it? I doubt it. You have a belief. He has knowledge. He has decided that his knowledge outweighs your belief, and is rescinding the taxes you’ve received and gotten fat from. ALL the taxes. And he’s rescinding the ban on taxing the church. So, you have a debt to pay to the people of Britain. Make an effort, and he MIGHT allow you to continue.”

“It would bankrupt us!”

“As you’ve aided in bankrupting Britain? For centuries? It’s time that you realized that he is not subject to the church. The church is subject to him. This is the reason that you were not called upon to crown him,” Nancy said.

“Nancy. End it. We take him to Home and let him discover the facts for himself,” Taylor said. And suddenly they were there, on Judgment Square and facing the vacant lot. And the cleric collapsed.

Taylor and Nancy stayed with him. Talked him through it. Sergeant Carter came over at one point and congratulated Taylor, said hello to Nancy, then went back to fielding those that had come at the end of their life. It took an hour, and the cleric was thoroughly crushed by the experience when Taylor returned them to his office.

“And now you know,” Taylor said. “What you worshiped has been dead for eleven years. And even then it wasn’t something deserving of worship. Merely a parasite that had enslaved Home and the people of earth,” he added, handing the man a mug of tea and seating him in his casual area. Nancy had returned to female form, and her normal grays.

“Billions of people have seen what you saw – know what you know. And they went voluntarily, under their own power. They are the Citizens of Home. They have been honored with that title due to their own willingness to face their own judgment and know who and what they actually are,” Taylor said. “Humans are the Children of Home – the Children of the Envoys. They were created to help Envoys gain experience and learn to be inventive. To take them out of the static state they were in. That is why I did not ask the Church to sanction my crowning. That crowning was by the will of the people. That is why the young lady whose office you may have seen refused – REFUSED to marry me by earthly conventions. You should see her office before you leave the castle. It is filled with Envoys. And now you know what Envoys really are. Messengers. Ones that held an archaic and religiously colored name until the end of the parasite.”

“No, Bishop, you will not 'sanction' this coronation or my joining with Muriel, the Leader of Home. Instead you will be allowed to live, and the church will begin to pay back the debt it owes the people of Britain. And now, I see that the Leader of Home's security chief has come to take you to Muriel. I suggest that you not make any outlandish statements to her about her status. I've been given to understand that she can get a bit testy at times – and I know what I'm talking about since I've seen her records and even been with her on some of the occasions. Farewell, Bishop. You may return another time if you have something to discuss that actually pertains to the well-being of the people of Britain. But not if it only pertains to your greed and the church.” Taylor took the mug from the man's hands, and Mata took him to Muriel.

Chapter 18

And More Politics

(Thursday, later)

"I see you've met your new monarch," Muriel said, softly. "THAT was brave of you. Look around the office. See the people there? There are only three humans in the office right now – you and I, and this young lady that is the King's private secretary. All the rest are Envoys. I was taught by the one that brought you here, Mata. And I went to Home, and met one that had been a friend and died. And I faced my Judgment. I've returned many times since then, and each time I face that Judgment. It's built into humans. It's you, judging yourself." Janice just looked at Muriel and the Archbishop, in awe of what was happening.

"Most people only face that judgment once, at the end of their earthly life and unwillingly. And I and many others have faced it numerous times. Willingly. And I was named by the Envoys as being the Leader of Home. Leader – the one that shows the way. The one that others follow because they want to. I was not elected, as you might think of it. It was simply that the vast majority of the Envoys were following me. And I didn't even know, until one day someone told me. I just kept doing what I do, and it was what they wanted. So, you see, I can't leave this position. No matter what I did, they'd still be following me, and I'd still be their Leader. I wasn't appointed. I wasn't elected. I wasn't sanctioned by some 'higher power'. I was simply followed."

"If you wish, I can train you in the Envoy techniques that allow us to do all these phenomenal things. But you'd have to face the judgment again. And I'm not sure you can clean up your past well enough to survive it again. However, the offer is there. We'll even offer help, if you want it. But know, now, that the church is not above Taylor or I, or any person that has taken the training. You do not have the right to sanction anything that we do. You are merely an untrained human with a belief, and little direction. And no, I do not rule Taylor. He's his own man. And he's my friend – someone I care about and that cares about me. I don't tell him what to do. I don't need to. I know his behavior as I know my own, and trust him to do what is right. I trust him because I know that he has to face his own judgment, and will do anything to make sure that it's not the ghastly experience that many people face."

"Now," Muriel finally said, "your car is out front. I think it's time for you to leave. But remember that if you WANT the training, I'm here." And the Archbishop turned, dazed, and went to his car and left.

"How are you doing, Janice," Muriel asked, sitting beside her. "Beginning to make sense, yet?"

"No," she said. "I'm beginning to feel insignificant."

"You needn't. You are more, now, than that Archbishop will ever be," Muriel said. "We must have just missed him. He must have arrived at Home just after we left. Well, knowing Nancy and Taylor, that was probably intentional. Us mere females shouldn't see a grown man

cry. Except that we do, many times in our life. And then we're there to comfort him and bring him back into the real world. The unforgiving world that has beaten him down. And sometimes, we get the chance to teach him how to beat the world back. Now, I was going to teach you how to glow and grow. Now that you have the training, it's easy. Just stand up and increase your power flow. And you'll glow."

And the training went on for another half hour. And at the end, Janice learned even more, that she could not only grow, but that she could add wings. And she could do that because, like everyone else, her soul was originally that of an Envoy. And that caused Janice to stand up straighter and be more confident, because she was in touch with that soul and KNEW who and what she was.

"About ready to go back to work?" asked Muriel. "And no, you won't be docked for the time it took to train you. Taylor knows that I'd brain him if he pulled a stunt like that." And Janice laughed.

"Yes, I can believe you would," she said. Then added, reflectively, "I always thought this was just a cult. Some fad that people were going through. I never realized that it was so . . . so real."

"Yea, about the realist thing that can happen to you," Muriel said. "Now imagine what it was like to be the first one trained, and even your parents didn't realize what you were going through. And at twelve."

"That must have been rough."

"At times, it was. At first," Muriel said. "But it all worked out. Anyway, you know what your desk looks like – what the office looks like. Why don't you lead, and I'll follow." And Janice translated them to Taylor's office. Nancy grinned as they translated in, and got up from the desk so Janice could take her place. And on the other side of the office, in Taylor's casual area, an argument was going on.

"I tell you, you have no authority over me!" a man said.

"Really? Actually I do," Taylor said. "I have the authority to fire you. I have the authority to have you arrested for taking bribes. I have the authority to have you disbarred for improper judicial procedures and for instituting such improper procedures throughout the court system. I have a record of the bribes you took, and who paid them. And I'm telling you that either you resign, now, or that's exactly what I'll do. King, remember? And it's the LAW that gives me the authority to have all those things happen. And no, I haven't taken any bribes. I've been very careful of where the money I accept comes from, to the point where even my salary has been checked below the level of just where the checks come from. Unlike you, I have not been bought. No outside entity has any claim on my judgment. Now, get out of my office and turn in your resignation, or tomorrow morning the police will wake you up and take you to your new quarters. Is that understood?"

When the man had left, Muriel said, "Woof! So, now you're picking on the judiciary."

"Yep. I asked Nancy to run a fast and dirty examination of the judges. Most of them are relatively clean. But he's the power behind a lot of the injustices that have been committed in the courts," Taylor said. "So I called him on them. He tried bluff and bluster, then threats. Then, as you heard, tried to say I didn't have the authority – implying that I was also bought, and would do what I was told."

"How'd you get him here so fast?" asked Muriel.

"Saul. Well, actually one of his squad. He's waiting in the outer office to take the man back to his office," Taylor said.

"Ah! Good."

"Yep. And I'm glad that we trained the police. They can pick him up wherever he is," Taylor said. "So, how'd it go with Janice?"

"Done. Fully trained, and ready to go back to work," Muriel said. "I even showed her how to grow wings."

"What? You never even showed ME that!" And Janice giggled.

"Ah, well, that can be remedied. But I suggest that you go to the center of the room. Less chance of breakage that way," Muriel said. "Good, now grow some. I KNOW you know how to do that, and the act of growing gives you the attitude you need for the rest. Now, dig deep in your soul and tell it you want wings." And suddenly huge wings appeared, spread and mantled over the much smaller figure of Muriel. And she grinned.

"Holy cow! They're huge! And they're not any delicate swan's wings," Taylor said.

"Nope. Eagle's wings. Similar to broad-winged hawks. That's how your soul thinks of you," Muriel said. If you scale back down, now, the wings will adjust to the new height," she said.

And when he had resumed his normal height, she surprised him. Her wings were more pointed, like those of a falcon, not those of a swallow. And she mantled back at him, and laughed.

"And now you know. They actually reflect the personality. And the soul knows, and adjusts the wings accordingly," she said. "Kinda like a self image." And she let hers disappear.

"Muriel, did anyone ever do any work on whole body changes?" Taylor asked.

"Hmm. I think not, or I'd have heard. Even if they were unsuccessful," she said. "The best we can do, right now, is illusion. Like this," she said, and put on the panther head and paws.

And Janice's mouth dropped open. THEN, she thought, grinned, and said, "Muriel? Like this?" And Muriel was facing the head and paws of a lynx. The tufted ears and double beard was unmistakable. And Muriel laughed.

"OK, trying to show up your teacher, now," she said. "And very well done. And off nothing but the suggestion. May I ask how you got it?"

"You said it. The soul knows. So, I gave it the image I wanted to project, and it happened. At least I think it happened. I could see my hands change to paws. But I can't see my face." Muriel made a mirror for her. "OH! Oh, my. I did it."

"Yes you did, and nicely, too," Muriel said. "Now, I suppose I should get out of here and let you get back to work."

"Um, not yet, Muriel. There's one more that I'm expecting," Ted said.

"Oh? Who this time?"

"Your old nemesis. The schools. Well, actually the head of the accreditation board," Taylor said.

"Uh, huh. I can see where this one is going. Taylor, may I suggest that we hold this discussion in MY office?" asked Muriel.

"Why?"

"I have more diplomas," she said, grinning. "Bring Janice, if you don't trust my intentions," she added, and growled. And he laughed.

"I just may, anyway," he said. And the three translated to Muriel's casual area. And just in time. Coming toward them, escorted by an Envoy, was a severely dressed woman. As she approached the doors, they snapped open and she paused, briefly then continued.

"Your Majesty, what is this? I expected to see you in your office!" she said.

"What you wanted or expected doesn't matter. I am here, and so are you. So, who are you, and what can I do for you?" he asked.

"Really, sir, this is a delicate matter that would be better discussed in private," she said.

"You know? The number of people that want to speak to me without my consort around is getting ridiculous," Taylor said. "Where I am, and who I am with is MY business. Either speak or leave. I don't care which. Except to note that if you leave you will not be allowed to return. Is that understood?"

The woman fumed. Muriel almost expected to see smoke or steam emerge from her

ears. "This . . . woman . . . claims the education that her organization gives is better than that taught in regular schools," she finally said.

"This woman, as you call her, is Muriel. She's the Leader of Home, Ambassador to earth, Chancellor of the University of Home, and my consort. I suggest you remember that. And as to education, I suggest you look at the wall by the end of her desk. Each of those is a diploma. A diploma that indicates that she's achieved the requirements of a Doctorate in each of several disciplines. And all of those disciplines have been tested and proven in several countries of the world. I suggest that, if you have a question about education, you talk to her."

"I certainly will NOT! The whole thing is a scam. She's running a diploma mill. Sixty three pounds for a PhD diploma? Ridiculous," she said.

"Oh, I don't know. Seems reasonable to me," Muriel said, quietly. "And actually, you're wrong. The price is only for those who don't have Envoy training, but are able to make a mental contact. And the only reason for that is because it takes the instructor more time and work to give the student the training, as well as the waiting period for the training to take effect so that he or she can know they've mastered the course of study. Those with Envoy training don't have any cost."

"This is absurd! Some mere cult claims to have a way of training people that doesn't involve schools and books and time?" she demanded.

"Well, as to the cult, you're wrong. Envoy training is not a cult. It's a proven adaptation or improvement on the human condition. And as for the training, it's been proven in many fields from medicine to engineering. It works, and the results are better than can be achieved by people without the Envoy training and the education in the desired discipline," Muriel said. "I've seen many of the examples, myself. Even done a few, though most of my degrees are in softer things like law, accounting, and management."

"So you say!"

"So I know," Taylor replied. "Perhaps you don't remember, but I was the commander of the Regiment of Home. The ones called the 'Jolly Greens' because of their attitude and uniforms. The ones that rode what are called 'ghost horses'. That was accomplished by using Envoy techniques."

"Trickery. Mere trickery."

"Well, if that's the case, then you should be able to do it, yourself," Taylor said. "In any case, I've examined the results of the education obtained from the University of Home, and find that it fulfills MORE of the qualifications of such a degree than the equivalent education offered by ordinary schools. Not only that, but several countries have found the same information concerning the education. My ruling stands."

"This is outrageous! You haven't heard the last of this," she said.

"Well, actually, I have. Should anyone else try to raise the subject they'll be investigated for collusion with profit-making organizations, like universities, text book publishers, and licensing agencies. And trust me, those investigations will be most thorough. Janice?"

"She's been ordered by the universities and publishers to make her demands," Janice said, looking at a tablet in her hands. "The last was by telephone, and rather abusive. Earlier communication was by emails and instant messaging. I can give you full transcripts, if you like, and if Muriel will allow me the use of a printer." And the woman turned beat red.

"You have no authority to run such investigations of my private life."

"Ah, but it's not your private life we're investigating. Merely your potentially criminal behavior," Taylor said. "Janice, when did the investigation start?"

"Your Majesty, I started the investigation when this woman made it clear that her intentions were to shut down the University of Home."

"So, it was AFTER the possibility of criminal intent was voiced," asked Taylor.

"Yes, sir," Janice replied.

"Oh, would you please make a note to have the heads of the universities, licensing agencies, and publishers in my office next week."

"Sir, if I may, the number of people would exceed the space available in your office. There is an auditorium nearby that would be large enough to hold them, though. I believe it's used for semi-private viewings of movies and other forms of entertainment," Janice said.

"Good point. Very good point. Very well, schedule it for there, then. And thank you, Janice."

"My pleasure, sir," she said, blushing and grinning.

"And now, madam, you are dismissed," Taylor said. When she had left, Taylor turned to Janice. "That was well done, and just the information I needed. Thank you. Feel free to inform me of things I need to know at any time. It would embarrass me much less to be corrected publicly than to make a fool of myself because I hadn't listened to good information."

"Thank you, sir," was all Janice could manage.

Chapter 19

End of a Discussion

(Wednesday afternoon, a week later)

A spotlight hit the dark red curtains on the stage, and the room darkened some. A brighter spot of light appeared near the bottom of the circle, then grew slowly into the figure of a man walking toward the stage, but from a considerable distance behind the curtain. As it grew to man sized proportions, there was a the sound of a bell, and King Taylor was in the auditorium. Two steps took him past the curtain, which hadn't so much as moved, and he looked out at the crowd. He was dressed in the red trimmed white uniform and with the crown. The fly plaid waived placidly for a moment, then settled against his back.

"You were called here," he said, "because there's been some major mis-information bantered about as to the quality and usefulness of the degrees offered by the University of Home. Your concerns have been noted and examined. That examination included the results obtained by practitioners of disciplines offered both by ordinary universities and those offered by the University of Home. The results are in."

"The practitioners of the disciplines offered by the University of Home were found to be better qualified to practice their disciplines. Their methods and procedures varied from those offered by ordinary universities, but were invariably better in many ways. They were also more up-to-date, and more readily available to the general public."

"You have wasted my time and that of my research committee on this matter. Your arguments were specious, to begin with. The education offered by the ordinary universities was found to be seriously out-dated. In part due to inadequate training of the professors and in part because the textbooks, themselves, were outdated. Likewise, the licenses offered by the licensing boards were, for the most part, either reliant on technology that is long past its prime and out-dated, or subject to corruption in the form of bribes, kickbacks, and outside influence. And the results of THAT examination are likewise on the web, and available for view or download."

"For this reason, I find that the courses offered by the University of Home are fully accredited. There will be no further discussion on the matter. In addition, for those disciplines that require licensing, I find that the licensing by the University of Home, or by Home's separate licensing bodies as sanctioned by the Leader of Home are recognized as being valid within the realm. Again, there will be no further discussion on the matter. The results of my findings are detailed and available for view on the government's website, and available for download in an approved format for your perusal."

"I therefore give you one year from this date to clean up your act. You will reduce your exorbitant costs and upgrade the quality of your education by that time, or lose your accreditation. As for the licensing boards, since you do not have the training and education offered through the University of Home, you are not qualified to license their disciplines. Further, if I find that your licensing depends on outmoded techniques, bribes, kickbacks, or

outside influence you will lose your right to issue any licenses.”

“This discussion is over, people. I’m tired of hearing your ridiculous complaints, arguments, excuses and threats. Shape up, people. Or lose all that you think you have a right to. This Royal decision will be made in writing, available on the web for anyone to see.” Then Taylor turned around and walked toward the curtain. A bell sounded, and he disappeared.

And in his office, he asked, “What did you think?”

“Good,” Muriel said. “You hit the mark right on the button. And the speech you gave was VERY good. Sometimes I don’t know how you deliver speeches like that. Mine always sound more informal and childish.”

“Practice, I think. Though I haven’t used it in years. We used to have to extemporize like that in school. And heaven help us if we didn’t have our facts straight,” he said. “I never used it with the Regiment. My speeches to them were always more informal. But the schools figured that we’d be in either some form of government or in law. Your’s are more effective, I think, because you’re gentle with people, then the teeth come out if they cross you. And people have learned to listen to what you say, out of fear of the teeth.”

“Well, it worked,” she said. “My spies tell me that they left grumbling and blaming each other. You know they won’t make it, don’t you?”

“Yep. I remember what happened in America. And they were given two years,” he said. “No other country even balked after that. Except for Britain. And that just changed. All the rest accepted the American results.”

“Taylor,” Janice said – shocking Muriel. How’d he get her to finally use his name? “There’s a Mister Wright, here to see you. He didn’t say what it was about or who he represented.”

“Send him in. He can’t be any worse than the last batch,” Taylor said. What entered was nothing like what Taylor or Muriel was expecting. Just a small, overweight, late middle aged man with glasses, scuffed shoes, and a suit that had seen better days. “Mister Wright! Come in. Have a seat. What can I do for you?”

“Ah! Your Majesty, thank you. And Muriel, Leader of Home. Oh, my. I am blessed. You have my best wishes on your consorting. Commendable what you have done. Oh, yes, quite commendable,” the man rambled on while taking a seat. “Your Majesty, I won’t take much of your time. Mostly I wanted to congratulate both of you on the way you’ve sidestepped or eliminated a lot of potential problems for yourselves and all other Envoy trained people. And the tricks you’ve pulled. That one where the spectral form comes through the curtain, why it took us a week to figure it out.” Muriel and Taylor looked at each other in bemusement. Was this person going to ‘blow the whistle’ on their staging?

“Oh, before you ask, no we won’t speak of it. But if we could figure out how you did it,

walking toward someone who projected the image, then translating at a prescribed point, then anyone can. Well, at least anyone with the training. And no, I didn't peek. It was actually my son that figured it out. He set up a camera in one of our rooms, then had me walk toward him until I hit a line taped on the floor. Then I was supposed to translate to a specific spot in the room. It made it look like I walked through the wall. Amazing effect," the man said. "We're cataloging these, just to see if there's things that might help us."

"Tell me, Mister Wright," Taylor broke in, "what is it that you need help with?"

"Oh, that. We were wondering what the limits were in translating. My son and I were thinking of starting up a transportation company for those that can't translate. Oh, nominal cost, say thirty pounds from here to New York City in the States. Nothing that would break anyone. Smaller costs for local trips. Things like that. We're not really out to make money. We just want to help people, and thought this might be a way to do it," Wright said.

"Muriel? I see the questions in your eyes," Taylor said.

"Mmm. Yes. A few. But I'm not sure that they're all things that Mister Wright's group can do. Oh, and to answer your question, we haven't found a limit. But then, we haven't really been looking for one," Muriel said. "Now, as for my questions. They aren't really questions as such. More like potential problems that would need to be addressed. And I think we can help you with that. Or I can. First is having safe points to translate from and to. You wouldn't want to translate into a crowd, for example. Second is having enough people to handle the potential traffic. Third would be traffic coordination, so that multiple people wouldn't be using the same safe point as a terminus at the same time."

"Good points. Very good points. It's almost like you had anticipated my coming, or had started planning something like this, yourself," Wright said.

"Then there's the matter of customs inspection and passports," Muriel said. "Unlike Ambassadors traveling between Enclaves, some governments can get quite sticky about such things. Also regulation of the business, and the potential for smuggling. There is still some drug trade that hasn't been eliminated, as well as other things. And no, we never really considered doing this. This is simply what I do, looking for potential problems and potential solutions. Some of this is easily done. But some of it I don't see how it could be managed without a great deal of specially trained people to cover the contingencies."

"Oh, this is fascinating," Wright said. "How do you do it?"

Muriel looked hard at the man, then sat back and smiled. "Mister Wright, I don't think you're here to see about entering the transportation business. I think you're here to try to find out how I think. Short form, get in deep connection with your soul. It knows or can find out things like you wouldn't believe. And the reason I don't think you want to get into transportation is because there ARE too many problems involved that would almost take a government to untangle. Also, you mentioned at the beginning that you were interested in how we did our 'tricks'. And how we, or at least I, think is another one of our 'tricks'."

Mister Wright sighed. And straightened up. "I should have realized that I couldn't out-think you, ma'am." And the seedy suit disappeared. The glasses changed from wire frame monstrosities to more modern looking ones. The shoes were polished, and the hair combed. "My son and I actually are interested in some of the things that you do. But it's not for any nefarious purpose. It started out with him being an illusion buff. You know, stage magic. But when reports started surfacing of some of the things you were doing in America, we hustled out to the British Enclave and I got trained. Then started trying to figure out how you did things."

"And how'd you do?" asked Muriel.

"Not bad. There were times when we would go back to the Enclave and talk to the Envoys, and ask them questions and see how close we came to getting it right," Wright said. "That awful bell sound you used with the UN had us stumped for a month, until my son rigged a track with a bell on it in our hall. He recorded the sound, then played it back. Still not right. So, then he played with the speed and realized what you'd done. Wicked sound. Went right up my spine. Tried flying, like the Regiment does playing that crazy airborne game. Couldn't get it right. One of the Envoys told us to anchor next to the source of our power, and suddenly we got it right."

::Saul, would you come here, please?::

Saul entered, and took one look at Mister Wright. "Hello, Sam. What's up?" And Mister Wright just covered his face with his hands.

"You work for her, then," he said.

"Well, actually I work for Taylor," Saul said. "Of course, technically I guess you could say that we work for Muriel. But that's only technically. So, what were you trying to find out, this time."

"How Muriel thinks," Sam said. "It bugged us that she was able to come up with so many different things."

"Oh, that. It wouldn't help you. She's unique. We haven't found anybody else that can cover the wide range of disciplines the way she can," Saul said. "And besides, she didn't come up with all of them. There's a lot of input from other people, both human and Envoys."

"Oh. Oh, my. We didn't consider that. We thought she'd come up with all of them," Sam said.

"Oh, no. That game that so fascinated you and your son? That was actually developed in its original form by her friends. The ones that are in the package marked 'Ambassadors All'. Then it was redeveloped by her and her friends to eliminate the possibility of spectators being hurt. And there's variations of it all over the world," Saul said. "So, how is your boy?"

"I don't think it'll be much longer," Sam said. And Muriel sat up straight.

"Your son. Where is he?" she asked.

"Why, in your office. We stopped there, first, and they said that you were here. The woman at the desk said that she and the squads would look out for him for me," Sam said.

"Taylor, let's go!" she said, and the four were translated to her casual area.

"Whoa, slow down, tiger," Fran said. "Mata called me as soon as the boy walked through the door. He'll be fine now."

"Dad? Did you find out anything?" a younger and thinner version of Sam said.

"Yea. Most important. Never try to out-think Muriel," he said, laughing. "And it's nothing that we can do. But there may be things that we CAN do. Oh, and she didn't come up with everything alone. Lots of people have had input in things, or even started them. But what about you? And who is this young lady?"

"I'm Fran. I'm a doctor. Envoy style medicine. I've been one since I was twelve. Sir, how is it that you didn't look for an Envoy style doctor?"

"Because there aren't any in Britain, except in the Regiment," Taylor said. "They couldn't get licensed. Janice!"

"Sir?" she said, translating in.

"Make a note that we've got to get Envoy doctors set up throughout Britain. I'll work out the details, later," he said.

"Got it, sir. Shall I remind you, tomorrow?"

"That would be fine. And keep it on the to-do list until I actually get to it."

"Very good, sir. Will there be anything else?" she asked.

"Not immediately. And thanks for popping in."

"My pleasure," she said, grinning, and translated out.

"And now you see how it's done," Muriel said. "It isn't a way of thinking as much as it is being aware of what's going on, and making rapid decisions based on it. Taylor picked up on the fact that Fran was here, and that she'd asked why you didn't take your son to an Envoy style doctor. That means that your son had some condition which, from what you and Saul said, was serious. That's why I jumped everyone, and why Taylor asked his secretary to remind him to get Envoy style doctors scattered around Britain. Make sense?"

“Now that you walk me through it, yes. Is he”

“He's fine, sir. More than fine, now. He's trained,” Fran said.

“How?”

“Oh, I'm one of Muriel's original friends. Twelve of us were invited out to see where she'd gone when she was out of contact with us for two days, and she ended up training all of us over two more days. Two or three months later, I took the course in medicine, and started working with the Envoy doctor that was in the Enclave. And shortly after that I had a major operation to do, alone, and it was so successful that the doctor turned me loose. So, since ALL of us first twelve were expected to be able to train others, I've kept current on the methods. So, after I took care of your son, he asked if he could finish being trained. And we went from there. We'd just gotten back from his trip to Home when you all arrived.”

“Trained,” Sam said.

“You gave him his passport?” asked Muriel.

“Yes. He asked if I could sign the certificate. I saw no reason why I shouldn't,” Fran said.

“Quite right. Thanks, Fran. Congratulations, young man,” Muriel said. “And Saul, thank you for working with them. Taylor, we'll work out how to get doctors trained and out in the field.”

Chapter 20

A Quiet Night Out

(Wednesday evening)

“Get dressed,” Taylor said.

“I beg your pardon? I AM dressed,” she said, then noticed that Taylor was in whites but without the crown. The more casual, 'Edwardian' ones. “What's up?”

“We're going out. Are your 'Fighting Formals' comfortable?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, switching. “You're being awfully mysterious, Taylor. What's this all about?”

“There's an area of London that has some of the best restaurants. Unfortunately, they're being hit by some of the last of the London thugs. So I thought we'd go take a walk and kick a few rocks over and see what crawls out. Oh, and we'll eat out, too,” he said.

“Uh, huh. Nice fat, showy target, huh?”

“I am NOT fat. I've even been keeping up with my exercise,” he said, and they translated to the corner of a street that obviously had lots of activity at night.

Restaurants and nightclubs dotted both sides of the street for as far as Muriel could see. Muriel affected a shoulder bag on her left shoulder, and pulled her shields in to the surface of her clothes. She noted that Taylor had similarly rigged his shields, and that they were sticky like hers except to each other. The crowds were orderly, and she saw no obvious disturbances.

::Are they pickpockets?: she asked.

::Nope. Drive up, like they were going to let people out, then jump out and hit an unsuspecting pair. Shouldn't be long, if my information is right.: And it wasn't.

A car pulled up just ahead of them, and the doors opened. Two young men came out and aimed for them. Both Muriel and Taylor extended their shields, expecting a grab, but the two surprised them. Instead of a grab, the two pulled out guns and ordered them to turn over their valuables. Muriel calmly smiled, and grabbed both men in shields, immobilizing the guns so they couldn't be fired. Taylor, in the mean time, stalled the car, slammed the doors shut, and sealed it with shields.

“Well, well,” he said. “Nice little haul. I'll just give the police a ring, shall I?”

“Are you on friendly relations with them?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, definitely. I brought two squads in and trained as many of them as could be trained,” Taylor said. “It’s sped up their response time admirably.” And he wasn’t kidding.

A police car suddenly appeared behind the one belonging to the would-be robbers. In a very short period of time, the pair facing Muriel and Taylor were bundled into the back seat and another car came to attend to the get-away vehicle. The second officer grinned and saluted Taylor as he attended his business, and shortly the ‘Royal pair’ were on their way again.

“Well, that was certainly interesting,” Muriel said. “Are they the only ones?”

“As far as my informant could tell,” Taylor replied. “Always pretty much the same method of operation. Always the same description. I figured we were the safest ‘bait’ to use, when he told me about the situation. After all, this bait bites back.” And Muriel laughed. “And this was fortuitous,” he added. “I believe the restaurant we want is just up here a bit.”

“That’s a considerable line in front of it,” Muriel said.

“Yes, well, we’re one of the few people that it actually will make reservations for,” Taylor said. “We’re a bit early, but I don’t think we’ll have any trouble.” And indeed, the doorman or bouncer, or whatever spotted them coming. The doorway was cleared of departing guests, and they were ushered in.

Inside, Muriel began to understand why Taylor was so sure that they’d have no trouble getting in, and she started laughing. “Impressive, isn’t it, Taylor said.

She hadn’t spotted the sign, outside, but inside it was unmistakable. The restaurant was called ‘The Jolly Greens’ and the logo was a large salad bowl filled with lettuce. Muriel was still laughing when the manager came up to them.

“Your Majesty! Ambassador Muriel! Welcome. No trouble, I hope,” he said.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle. Your guests should be safe, now. But do let me know if you have any more trouble, will you?” asked Taylor.

“Oh, I will. So you got them, then.”

“I believe we got the right ones. They actually pointed guns at us. Other than that, it was a dark, late model car with two men inside. They came straight for us, and we held them for the police,” Taylor said. “And since we held them in shields, they still had their guns drawn and bags held out to hold the valuables. I doubt that we’ll even have to make a report.”

“When you said you were coming, I reserved a table for you and your young lady. This way, if you please,” the manager said.

Behind them, they heard some male voice ask, “What is this? We’ve been in line for a half hour, and they get to just cut in?”

"Oh, I see this IS going to be interesting," Muriel said, quietly. "Best behavior now. Make the help comfortable."

"I think we can manage that. Honestly, Muriel, I DID learn something from you," Taylor said, laughing. "It's one of the reasons that I'm popular, here. And a few other places. They know they can relax around me and I'm not going to get upset with honest mistakes or accidents."

"Good man! I KNEW there was some reason that I decided to consort with you," she quipped back. They reached their table and took their seats, and Muriel started looking at the menu. "OK, this is all new to me," she said. "You may have to help me out."

"Yes, well, you may not believe this, but much of it is new to me, too," Taylor said. "I never did get the whole thing with wine, for example. The couple of times I was in here, we joked about the name being similar to the nickname of the Regiment. They recognized my uniform."

"What is this? I specifically asked for something away from the kitchen!" a male voice sounded above the quiet crowd noise of the place.

"Sir, this is what's available, immediately," a waiter replied. "And you did say that you wanted to be seated immediately."

"Oh, my. I believe that's our loudmouth from outside," Muriel said.

"Hmm? Yes. I think you're right. He's one of the few that was cashiered out of the Regiment. He thought his father's money would buy him a higher rank, and was always mouthing off about the way things were run. He lasted about two weeks. I see he hasn't changed."

"Well, I do hope he's not trying to impress the woman with him. Constant grumbling about everything can get you a cold bed," Muriel said. "Oh, here comes the waiter."

"Good evening, Your Majesty. And congratulations," he said. Then began the arduous task of selecting wine, which Muriel short-circuited by pleading ignorance. The waiter just smiled, and asked her what types of things she liked, then suggested something as a possibility and whisked away. He was back shortly with a bottle, and poured a bit in two glasses for them to sample.

"Good! This will work for me," Muriel said. Taylor agreed, and the waiter filled the glasses to the appropriate level, took their dinner orders, and left. "How is it that this place has such a name, yet serves more than salads?"

"Oh, that," Taylor said. "Fortunately, I asked the manager the same question, so I know the answer. He actually started it as a salad bar. But as it became more popular, patrons asked if he could do something more. So, he turned it into a full fledged restaurant, but with

the same name. That was about twenty years ago, and we got quite a chuckle over the fact that the Regiment had the same nickname. It's also why I was VERY careful about not using that nickname publicly, and cautioned my commanders to be the same way."

"Good thinking," Muriel replied.

"What is this! Can't you do anything right?" a male voice rang out, drawing eyes to a particular table. The same one where the loudmouth was sitting. And the cause of the outburst was obvious. In trying to extract the cork, the waiter had broken the neck of the bottle. Then, Muriel realized that it was the same waiter that served them.

"Oh, my," she said. "I think our waiter needs a break in order to calm down. That man is beginning to get on his nerves."

"Mmm. Yes. Well, I think we can deal with that," Taylor said. They watched, furtively, as the waiter bustled away, then shortly returned with another bottle and managed to get it right. He poured and left the bottle, leaving quickly.

In moments the waiter returned to their table with salads, and Muriel stopped him. "We saw what happened," she said. "Why don't you take a moment or two to relax, here. If your manager says anything, I'm sure we can calm him down, too."

"Oh, that man. He's been in here exactly three times. Two waiters have quit because of him. And after tonight, the manager won't let him in again. He'll be told that when it's time for him to leave. He pulls something like this every time, as a way of forcing the manager to give him a free meal. It's just that this time, it was me that got him. And that particular wine is expensive, and is in the WORST bottles to try to open."

"Well," Taylor said, "I think I have a solution for that. And one that will make it obvious that bad behavior can cause unwanted attention. Ask the manager to come over when he has an opportunity. I'll pay for the man's meal. And the manager can tell him. And tell him who paid for it. Oh, and have the manager include the cost of that first bottle, too. No sense the establishment having to pay the cost of a loudmouth's inability to behave with decorum." And the waiter laughed.

"Sir, I'll tell him now. And even if the manager doesn't accept your offer, I appreciate the thought. Thank you," the much relieved man said, and left.

"Yep. That should do it," Muriel said, grinning. "This salad is good! I can understand how he got popular off just these."

"Yes. One of his specialties is distinctive salads. I think you'll enjoy the main course, too," Taylor said. "He was as picky about those menus as he was about the salads." They continued in silence for some time, keeping an eye on the goings on at the other table. Then their meals arrived and took their attention.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty, miss. Is everything all right, here?" the manager said,

startling them. They'd never seen him come up.

"Oh, yes. Quite. You've done it again!" Taylor said.

"Brad – oh, that's your waiter – told me what you said, Your Majesty. That's a very generous offer you made"

"But you don't want to accept," Taylor interrupted with a grin. "Well, it's like this. He tried out for the Regiment, and was the same way. Thought his daddy's money would buy him an instant command without his having to work for it. Never made it through the basic training. So, my paying for his meal will be demonstrating to him that his bad behavior is noticed where he might not like it to be noticed. Especially since he's running for the new Parliament. Please, accept this offer. In fact, if you like, my consort and I would even be willing to let him know that we're the ones paying for it."

"Oh, that won't be necessary, Your Majesty. I'm sure I can handle it. Especially since I'll also be telling him that this is his last meal, here," the manager said, grinning. "And thank you for calming down Brad, too. He was ready to quit until you talked to him. That would have been the third waiter I'd lost because of that man. And Brad's a good one."

"You're entirely welcome. If you don't mind, we may stick around to make sure there aren't any problems," Taylor said. The rest of the meal was a quiet and pleasant anticlimax. Then, as they began to enjoy deserts, they noticed movement two tables over.

"Oh, oh. Storm warnings," Muriel said. "Our loudmouth is getting into a towering rage. To bad he doesn't know how to use it."

"How DARE they! Upstarts, both of them," the man said, knocking over the chair as he rose. The woman with him tried to catch up to him and stop him, and was knocked down.

"I've got her, you take care of him. We may be making a detour home. Hope you don't mind," Muriel said, and translated to the woman's side. "Just stay still, now. Let me be sure you're all right," Muriel said, the battlefield first aid course already kicking in. Muriel discovered a bump and abrasion on the back of the woman's head, and assorted bumps on her arms where she tried to break her backward fall. In moments, the woman was able to stand, but Muriel kept her away from the focus of the entire restaurant.

The loudmouth was doing a good job of living up to his nickname, upbraiding Taylor in grand fashion, which Taylor was pleasantly ignoring. Finally, he said something about Muriel that caused Taylor to look at him. Then stand up. And Muriel could have sworn that she could here the entire restaurant gasp. It was then that they recognized the King.

"I think that's just about enough disturbance from you," Taylor said quietly. "Such public display of bad manners is not appreciated here. Or anywhere, for that matter. I've taken the liberty of alerting the police, and they'll be taking you in for disturbing the peace." And that did it. The man took a swing at Taylor – and stuck. Taylor just calmly wiped his mouth and set his napkin down, as an officer came up and took charge of the man.

"Disturbing the peace and assault, I think," Taylor said. "Unless you can think of something else. I'm afraid I'm a bit vague on the law."

"No problem, sir. We'll just make that assaulting the King, I think, sir. Make for a fine interlude on the late news on the telly. Probably make tomorrow morning's news, too. He'll be famous. Briefly," the officer said, as he cuffed the man.

"We'll take you home, miss," Muriel said. "Don't worry, you'll be home safely and quickly. Did you leave anything in his car?"

"What? No. Nothing. But I can't expect you to go out of your way for me," the woman said.

"It's no problem. And nothing in the world is out of the way for us," Muriel replied.

"But, I don't even know who you are!" the woman replied.

"Oh, sorry. I thought you knew. My name is Muriel."

"Muriel? Like the Ambassador that's consort to the King?"

"Yes, exactly. Taylor and I will make sure you're safe. And if you come by my office, tomorrow morning, I'll be happy to show you around," Muriel said.

"Your office?"

"Yes. It's inside the complex that is called Buckingham Palace. Just ask the guard. They'll help you find me."

"OHMYGOSH! You really ARE her?"

"Well, I really am me. And I'd like to make sure that I didn't miss anything when I took care of the bump on your head," Muriel said, smiling. "I'm more used to dealing with messy traffic accidents. Will you come, please?"

"I . . . Yes, mum. Whatever you say," the woman said.

Chapter 21

Aftermath (Thursday)

“Um . . . excuse me?”

“Yes, miss? What can I do for you,” the guard in a familiar green uniform said.

“Last night, a woman said to come by her office. That it was in the Palace. I mean, she said her name was Muriel . . .,” the woman finally ran down, and looked very frightened to be even this close to a guard.

“Ah, yes. She did let us know. No problem. Right this way miss. Clarence, take my position. Errand to run for the Ambassador.”

“Right, Tom. Next one's mine. I haven't seen the office, yet.”

“Yer on, mate. Come. This way. It only looks like a long distance. You see the gold emblem over there, right over the glass doors?” the guard, Tom, said, rambling on for the sake of the young woman's nerves. “That's where we're going, miss. His Majesty's been good to his consort, allowing the Regiment of Home to be her guards, here in the Palace. Didn't think we'd get such plush details. But after a couple of fiascoes that could have ended up in disaster, he felt that it would be better that someone watch over her that knew who she actually was. Here we are, then. Don't mind the doors, they open fast, but close real slow, and only when there's no one close to them. Good Morning, Mata! Got a young lady here to see the Ambassador.”

“Tom, did you talk her ear off all the way over? She looks like she's in shock!” Mata said, coming to the young lady and taking her hands. “Come. She'll be right here. Taylor and she are going over some last minute things, but she won't be long. She knows you're here. Can we get you anything?”

“Um”

“Ah, yes, No problem. Straight back. It's the room on the right. Tom, take her back there past all those evil looking Envoys, and bring her back, will you, please?” asked Mata.

The young woman noted that, if they were 'evil' Envoys, they certainly didn't look it. Those that saw her and the guard simply smiled and nodded. The rest went on about whatever they were doing. And she began to relax, some.

The young woman moved quickly inside the restroom as Tom talked with the Envoys near the back of the break room. It was only a few minutes later that she came back out, looking less intimidated and more relaxed. Tom smiled and walked her back to the casual area.

"Now, how about a nice hot cup of tea?" asked Mata. And a young man in the now familiar gray uniform set a tray on the coffee table.

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem, miss. If you need anything else, just call me. I'm Chuck. I did Muriel's plumbing in her first office and apartment, and then her cooking. So she threatens to call me Upchuck," and that brought a smile to the woman's face.

"Ah, you made it," Muriel said from the doorway, just as the woman seated herself. "Welcome to my office."

"You really ARE the Ambassador!" she said.

"Oh, titles. I hate using them. Always have. Just my name is enough," Muriel said. "Unless you're a bully – someone that's trying to bring people down. For them, I use the titles."

"Dear, is this the same young lady from the restaurant?" Taylor said, following Muriel in.

"Your Majesty!" the young woman exclaimed, jumping to her feet and nearly spilling her tea.

"Just Taylor. In here, I'm outranked," Taylor said. "In fact, in most things I seem to be outranked. So, just Taylor. Unless we HAVE to be formal. But this isn't a formal office, as I think you've noticed. And who are you?"

"OH! Nobody important. Ada King," she said.

"Interesting name. Rather famous, too, if not in that form. Augusta Ada King was the Countess of Lovelace, if I remember right, and the first computer programmer. As a result, she became known as Ada Lovelace, and a computer programming language is named for her. She was also the daughter of George Gordon Noel Byron. As an author. He was known as Lord Byron, since he was a Baron. Too bad that the computer that she wrote the program for was never built," Muriel said.

Ada looked at Muriel in shock. "How did you know?"

"A friend of mine programs computers. Also designs them. And cars. And lots of things. You have a phone? May I see it?" asked Muriel. Ada took it out of her purse and handed it to Muriel. Muriel smiled, and handed it back. "It's one of the ones he designed. I'll see about getting you a new one."

"But . . . I can't afford a new phone!" Ada said.

"No. But I can. Don't worry about it," Muriel said. "Did you know that it has other capabilities? Even this one. It can connect to anyone you can think of, can search anywhere. For it's time, it was state of the art. But that was a few years ago. Why didn't you turn it in for a new one?"

"I didn't know I could, without buying a new one," Ada said.

"Yep. You buy the original phone and connection charge. After that, upgrades are free. I know. I set up the original contract," Muriel said. "The phone company and carrier are part of the Envoy Enclave Enterprises, and that's been one of my hats for years, now. So, we'll set you up with a new one. But before we do, I think we ought to see about setting you up. Hmm?"

"Wha . . . What do you mean about setting me up?" asked Ada.

"Oh, nothing painful, really," Muriel said. "It's just that we can give you the training necessary to really use your phone."

"You can? But, how?"

"Oh, rather simply, I think. By the way, have you met Mata? Yes? Good. You DO know that she's an Envoy, don't you? What's another word for Envoy?" Muriel asked.

"Um . . . isn't an Envoy like a messenger?" asked Ada.

"Good. Very good. And where do Envoys come from?"

"Someplace called Home," Ada said.

"Well, that's true. But did you know that Envoys don't really have a body? It's true! Honest. No body. Just a soul that makes shields to look and feel like a body." And Muriel watched as the woman began to shake a little.

"No, nothing scary. What are humans?" asked Muriel.

"They're . . . I don't know . . . just human. They've got a body. And a soul," and the shaking got stronger.

"Humans are a body and a soul. Envoys are ONLY soul. Where did the human soul come from?" Muriel asked. And Ada froze. "Come on, Ada. You KNOW the answer to this. Your SOUL knows the answer to this. And Ada blinked.

"That's nasty," she finally said. "You TRICKED me."

"Nope. I just let you connect to your soul. Now, a little bit of training to remind you of what and who you are, and to catch you up to date with the latest developments in using the training. Then we can show you how to really unlock your phone," Muriel said.

Ada looked around, then said, "You and Taylor are the only two humans here. All the rest are Envoys."

"Mmm, hmm. That's right. Nobody here but us people. And now you know what Envoys are. What's another word for messenger? An old, archaic word with religious overtones?" asked Muriel.

"Angel. It's old. Greek, I think. Basically, it means 'one that brings a message'. How did I know that?" asked Ada.

"Good connection," Taylor said. "Your soul knows where it came from, and why they were called angels."

"And they're more than that. They're the messenger AND the message. And the message is the training that all people were supposed to have," Muriel said. "And more. They're protectors and nurturers. Humans are literally the Children of Envoys. That's why, when a human makes the trip to home and back they are given a certificate stating that they are the Citizens of Home. Now, let's see about getting you up to date."

It took an hour and a half. But at the end of it, on the trip to Home, she was giggling. NOBODY Muriel knew had ever giggled on their first trip home. But, the way Ada explained it, she'd always wanted to know what heaven – Home – was like, and now she was living her dream. Then it was time for the phone, and Muriel asked Jeff for a new one, and indicated the phone number that it would have. Muriel handed it to Ada, and told her to simply say 'hello' mentally to it.

"It GIGGLED!" Ada said. "It GIGGLED, then the screen went crazy. And when it stopped, everything was there!"

"Yep. And the other phone no longer works. Simple as that," Muriel said.

"Oh, much simpler than that, Muriel. So, this time it giggled, huh?" And Muriel swung around to see her friend standing there.

"JEFF! What brings you out?" asked Muriel, then stopped and said, "Jeff, this is Ada King. Ada, the inventor of that phone, my friend Jeff. All right, guy. Talk!"

"You said the magic word. Ada. I had to see who would be blessed with that name in this day and age," Jeff said. "What do you do for a living, Ada?"

"Just a secretary," she said.

"You know, I met two 'just a secretaries'. One of them is now the best CEO of a company that I've ever seen. And the other changed fields and got into programming. She's come up with some amazing changes in the way Games work, by trying to use the same type of thinking that humans do. And she got the idea from the way that we teach people the PhD

courses, like you see on Muriel's wall. So, if you could be anything, what would you want to be," he said, as Betty wandered unobtrusively toward the casual area.

"I really don't know. I'm not qualified for anything but secretarial work," Ada said.

"Immaterial. We supply the education, if it's at all available. And if it isn't, we see about MAKING it available. What interested you when you were growing up. What did you do to relax?" asked Jeff.

"My turn, Jeff," Betty said, quietly. "Forgive him, Ada. He's used to hollering at supervisors in a factory because things aren't done the way he thinks they should be done. And he has a point. They need it. But you don't. Can I connect to you for a minute?"

"Sure, I guess," Ada said. And Betty connected. And smiled.

"She's not one of yours, Jeff. Despite the name. So, English, secretarial – simply because what she needs is the ability to type well – various concrete arts, engineering and architectural, music. I think that should do for a start," Betty said. "Come, Ada. You'll see how a REAL education is done. Fifteen minutes from now, I'll be handing you diplomas."

Betty took her to the break room, put her in a recliner and had her think of nothing and just pass the courses to her soul. And she was true to her word. Fifteen minutes later, she was handing her a stack of diplomas to stuff in a 'no pocket' until she got home.

"Now, you're welcome to come back," Muriel said, "especially if you feel that there's something lacking. Keep your current job for a bit until you know you're going to make it in your new profession. But if you need help, holler. We'll help. And you're looking a bit shell-shocked. Would you like to stay for a while and let it settle in?"

"How . . . how did you know what I wanted to do?" asked Ada.

"Betty. When she connected with you, she read your personality – likes, dislikes, stuff like that. So, she just gave you the tools to work with. Now," Muriel said, "I don't know for sure what she had in mind, but I'd bet it had to do with writing. Like being an author. Interesting second parallel. The original Ada, her mother forced her into learning math, at the highest levels that were in existence at the time. And the reason was because she didn't approve of Lord Byron's being an author. And now, you've reversed it." And Muriel grinned.

"I've always wanted to be an author," Ada said, more to herself than to Muriel. "But I never knew how to do it. And my spelling and typing weren't very good."

"Betty?"

"Yes, Muriel. I included a spell checker. And not the one I can see in your mind. That old joke isn't needed with her. Oh, and a thesaurus, too. She'll be able to write intelligently," Betty said.

“Not like me, then,” Muriel grinned back.

“Well, hey! You COULD. But you keep insisting that it's somebody else's job” Betty quipped. And Mata discovered that change of location didn't affect her aim. Ada looked shocked for a moment, then giggled. “So, you,” Betty said, pointing to Ada, “go forth and write. Sell your first book, then I don't think you'll have to worry about an income ever again. You've got the ideas locked up in your head. Turn them loose. Just let me know when you ARE published. I'd like to see how you do.”

“Yes, ma'am. What ever you say, ma'am,” and she mock-saluted and giggled again. And Muriel was very glad that she wouldn't have to listen to that giggle every day.

When the girl left, Betty turned to Muriel. “The giggle WILL stop. She's just on a high from all that's happened. A couple of weeks at the most, and she'll be more serious. Oh, still enjoying the new life, but better in control of herself,” she said, and smiled like an indulgent mother.

Chapter 22

Exercising Her Rights – and Lefts (Friday morning)

“Taylor, I think I'm going to go into town. Anything I can pick up for you?” asked Muriel.

“Nope. I've got what I need right here. Any special reason?” he asked.

“I want to get a feel of the city and this country – see what it needs and how I might be able to help,” she replied, changing into casual clothes.

“Taking anyone with you?” asked her consort.

“Nope. Not really necessary, is it?” she asked.

“Well, I don't know,” he said. “It might be . . . for their protection,” he added, and grinned.

“Oh? You think?” she said, sweetly. “But I'm just a sweet, innocent little girl.”

“Uh, huh. Take Mata with you,” Taylor said. “That way, when the riot starts, I'll know where to go to watch.” And she hit him, and grinned.

“You could always come with me and keep me safe,” she said.

“More like keep everyone else safe,” he replied. “Seriously, Muriel, stay away from the guards. I think they're a little tender about having failed their proficiency exams. And I know why. They're not used to being told what to do. Trouble is, they think YOU'RE the cause of all their troubles.”

“OK, I will. And I know you mean the guard barracks, not the Regiment of Home that's standing duty, now,” she said. “I just wish you'd let Marcia loose on the ones in the barracks. I can guarantee that if you did, they'd tighten up in no time. She believes in the sewage method of instilling order.

“Sewage method? I don't think I've ever heard of that one.”

Smiling sweetly, she said, “Shit flows downhill.” And he roared with laughter.

“You're saying that she'd start at the top, and make those upholstered idiots try to meet her standards!” he finally managed to say.

“Yep. Works every time. Those feather beds on feet believe in leading from behind. Privilege, again,” she replied.

"Hmm. I have an idea. You're not going to like it," he said.

"Try me. If I don't, maybe I can come up with an alternative," she said.

"I'll haul the commanders over here, and place YOU in charge of them."

"OK. When do you want to do this?" she asked.

"You're serious!"

"As a heart attack. One fast game of dodge-ball with them will convince them that maybe their men are out of shape. That they can't even hit one little girl," Muriel said. So, bring them over and put them in the quad."

"Not dodge ball. Just make them exercise for five minutes. The same ones YOU do. And I've seen the ones you do. They'd never make it through five minutes," he said.

"Uh, huh. So I'd better ask Fran if she and her squad can come over," she replied. "Actually, DON'T bring them over. Just let me know when and where they do morning PT. I'll go to them. And no, I won't wear something skimpy. I'll be in utilities, boots, and hat."

"Can you RUN in those things?" he asked.

"How do you THINK I've been exercising? And I do hand-clap push-ups. Off my knuckles. And belly-busters are done the four count way. I don't cheat, Taylor. It's my body, and I want it to work," she said.

"Good grief. You'll demoralize them!"

"No. That'll happen when we go on a run. You'll see. And if one little girl can meet the standard, then they should be able to," Muriel said. "After I've shown them that a CIVILIAN can do better than they can, THEN you can put me in charge of them if you want to."

"OK, you're on," he said, and gave her the image. "They should be starting in about a fifteen minutes."

"MATA! One squad, please. We're going to panther-walk out of the air. I'm going to get my morning exercise with an audience, this morning," she said and sent, and added the image of where they were going. Then translated out.

Sure enough, the guards were just stumbling out of the barracks when they came in over the end of the area and started their panther-walk to the ground. And they had eyes on them. They moved to the center-front of the area and the squad and Mata made a line behind Muriel, standing at a precise parade rest.

The PT instructors – the OVERWEIGHT PT instructors – did their best to ignore her, and simply started the group on jumping jacks. After five minutes, they called a halt, and the

men took time to breath. Muriel, on the other hand, proceeded to start in on her push-ups. And could hear the comments as she counted them off.

“JEEZ! Look at that girl!”

“I know. Hand claps off her knuckles! Where the hell does SHE train.

“And with a pack. SHIT! She isn’t even breathing hard. Who IS she?”

Then a round of belly-busters – legs six inches off the ground, separate them, bring them together, put them on the ground. Each step at one second intervals. And repeat. And repeat. Fifty repetitions. Then sit-ups for another fifty reps. Then squat thrusts.

“Miss, you're going to have to leave,” one of the instructors said, coming over to her.

“Really! I don't think so. Your men are sadly out of shape. And you haven't even started the run, yet,” Muriel said. “I'd expect more of those that are supposed to be the cream of the crop. ESPECIALLY those that are set to guard the King. Get your commander down here.”

“Miss, I don't take orders from civilians,” he said.

“Uh, huh. You don't take orders from your monarch, either, do you? You just had your proficiency exams, and failed,” Muriel said. “I've shown you what one civilian girl can do. I've run five different exercises while you were giving the troops a break, and I'm not even breathing hard. And this was just a LIGHT exercise for me. Be glad I didn't call in my friends. They'd REALLY show you up. And again, they wouldn't be showing off – they'd just be doing their morning routine. Now get your commander.”

“Miss, like I said . . . ,” he started, and she cut him off.

“My name is Muriel. That's Her Grace to you. Or, if you prefer, Ambassador to earth and Leader of Home. And I don't take backtalk from some mere sergeant. **COMMANDER, GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE AND EXPLAIN WHY YOUR MEN CAN'T PASS A SIMPLE PROFICIENCY EXAM!**” And her amplified voice rang off the walls of the Palace, nearly a city block away. While she waited, she took off her pack and handed it to the sergeant. And his arm dropped. It was a couple of minutes before an overstuffed couch walking on two legs managed to exit the building.

“What is all this?” wheezed the man.

“You were given proficiency exams. Part of that was physical fitness. You failed ALL of it. I came out this morning to see what your troops could do, and get some light exercise, and found the answer before I could even work up a sweat,” Muriel said. “And I haven't had any military training. I'd expect them to be AT LEAST as good as I am, particularly if you intend to use them as guards for your King. They aren't. I'll be giving a report of my findings to His Majesty.”

"Yea? Well how come your squad didn't do any exercise?" came a yell from the troops.

Mata quietly came forward and smiled at the troops. "Because it wouldn't be fair," she said, and slowly disappeared. A moment later she slowly appeared in another location. "No muscles. We're Envoys. We don't have bodies." Then, she turned and went back to her place.

"You've freeloaded off the taxes of the citizens and the good will of the crown for long enough," Muriel said. "If you aren't even going to TRY to get in shape, then there's no sense keeping you on the payroll."

"Well, miss, we don't take orders from some civilian upstart," the commander said.

"No, and you don't seem to take orders from your King, either," Taylor said, translating in. "Well, that's all right. I can make sure that you don't have to, anymore. I suggest you and your troops start packing. You obviously don't want to improve yourselves. And I can't force you. But I don't have to keep paying you if you're not going to do your jobs. However, I can always use you as the poster child for what happens when you're given a direct order and fail to accomplish the goals set for you. You're excused, Lieutenant."

"That's Colonel, sir," the commander said, as if to someone that had no knowledge of military rank.

"No. I'm sure I said Lieutenant. Oh, and to make it official," Taylor said, "here's the orders demoting you." And he handed the man a piece of paper. "I expect these barracks to be vacated within twenty-four hours. And clean. If I have to have someone clean them up, you'll be out on a dishonorable discharge. Oh, and before you say that I don't have the authority, remember who I am. And who I was before I took this current position. My name is Taylor. I was Colonel in Chief of the Regiment of Home. I'm currently the King of Britain. And I don't believe in leading from behind, from a padded swivel chair. Now beat it." The ex-Colonel quickly waddled his way back to the barracks, and the sergeants dismissed the troops.

"Well, that explains a lot," Taylor said. "He had a group sent out that almost might have passed the tests, with a little more work. Obviously, they were the best troops he had. I'll have Colonel Jackie fill in the positions, here, and she can rotate as she sees fit. And I may as well disband that outfit, completely. These were supposed to be the best. And if that's the best, then I'm glad that we're not currently at war with anyone."

"Well, sorry I disturbed you, Taylor. I didn't mean to."

"You didn't, love. But I could feel what was going on. And looking through your eyes, I could see what the problem was. That was quite a show you gave them."

"Yea, and the day's young. I might as well see how things are for the REAL people," she said.

"I still think you should take someone with you. It would make me feel more comfortable," he said.

"Well . . . all right. If it will make you feel better. But honestly, I CAN take care of myself," she replied, smiling. She and the squad translated back to her office.

"OK," Mata said, "why don't you sit down and have some coffee for a few minutes. I need to check on a few things before we amble out."

"I'm keeping you from your work?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. Not work. Not really," Mata said. "Just some stuff that's been nagging at me. And I can't place where I've seen it before. I want to see if I can figure out what I'm missing. Something about that commander. Something just wasn't right. But I'm glad that Taylor still has the Regiment of Home doing the actual guard duty, here."

"Oh, really!" Muriel replied. "I'll admit that for a military officer and outfit, they looked remarkably poor. Like they were just going through the motions."

"You saw it, too, then," Mata said. "I just don't think we should leave the palace until we know Taylor's going to be safe. You know, the problem with having people from a large organization doing the guarding is that there's the likelihood that a stranger wearing the same uniform could manage to slide by."

"But, wouldn't they need passwords or something?" asked Muriel.

"Not necessarily, if they had the right paperwork," Mata said.

"You think someone managed to pull a swap, and that the guards really aren't Regiment of Home?" asked Muriel.

"Well, that's one thought. Another is that it was simply that unit at the barracks that was swapped out, and they've got something else planned," Mata replied.

"OK, this might sound like overkill, but how many ways in and out of this place are there?" asked Muriel.

"TOO many."

"Then it's time to holler for help," Muriel said. "Flood the place with Envoys in stealth. Anybody moves wrong, hold them for positive identification."

"Already on it. We're flooding the barracks complex, too," Mata said.

"What have you got, Mata," Saul said, translating in.

"I don't know. And that's what's bothering me. Something's out of kilter," she said. "Muriel, do you have a good image of that commander?"

"Yea, I think so. Why?"

"Would you run a search on your computer, and see what you come up with, please?" asked Mata. "Mine is tied up working a different angle."

"On it," Muriel said, and ran the mental request to her phone to identify the person in the image. "This may take a bit. Britain may not be as large as the United States, but there's still a lot of people to search."

"What is it working?" asked Saul.

"Driver's licenses, right now," Muriel replied. "And arrest records. So far, nothing. Just on a hunch, lock down the barracks complex. Nobody in or out but us until we have this figured out."

"Done," Mata said. "Gad! I hate this."

"I know," Muriel said. "Just not enough information."

Chapter 23

Unmasked

(Friday morning, afternoon)

"Muriel? Oh, good, you're still here," Taylor said. "Something's wrong. I just got a report from the front that some of that bunch from the guard barracks is saying that they're supposed to take over the guard duty, now. The Regiment guard are holding them for confirmation."

"We're working the other side of it. Right now, we don't have much more than suspicions," Muriel said. "Like you, something just didn't work right. We locked down the barracks, and I'm trying to trace their commander that you turned into a lieutenant. Your group must have gotten out just before it was locked down. And you're covered. Envoys in stealth, out of Home. And you were worried about ME getting into trouble," she said, grinning at him.

"OK, I've got a hit," Mata said. "Customs and immigration. Our unlovely commander is an import. And no, he's not from America. According to his passport, he's from Canada. Fred's countering that with his being from Australia. We've got a player, but I don't think this is from a country."

"OK," Taylor said, "I've got some extra troops from the Regiment that are escorting them back to the barracks. Let them in, please, and we'll go find out what's going on." And Muriel switched to her fighting class 'A's'. And grinned.

"Taylor, I need a request," Muriel said.

"Madam Ambassador, I formally request assistance"

"That's it. Let's go," Muriel said. And she, Taylor, Mata and four squads immediately translated to the guard barracks compound. "Taylor, make sure it's written up, and on my desk. Make it as open as you can," she said and sent, as she headed for the door. "Squads out. Find that lieutenant." Mata stayed with Muriel. It was only minutes before the squads were back, and so was the lieutenant.

"What is the meaning of this!" the man blustered.

"Exactly what I was wondering," Muriel said. "Something about you didn't add up. So we did some checking. It would appear that you're not who you appear to be. So, now we find out who you are, and why you're here."

"You have no authority here," he said.

"Wrong answer. In accordance with the treaty that Home has with Britain, my assistance can be called on in times of emergency, or for investigation of criminal activity.

Impersonating an officer of the military constitutes a crime. So, would you like to tell me who you are, and who you really work for?"

"I don't have to say anything to you," he said.

"No, you don't HAVE to. But you will," Muriel replied, pegging his mind to 'truth'. "Let's start with who you are and who you're working for. Then you can go on to tell me what your purpose in being here is."

It didn't take long. In short order, the same company who's CEO Taylor had reamed out was named. The target was no surprise. He was told to take out 'this so-called King Taylor and his concubine'. While Muriel was running her 'inquiries', Taylor had gotten ahold of the police, and buses were on the way. And Mata had sent the squads back in to affect the evacuation of the buildings.

"Excuse me, miss. I'm looking for a Muriel White?" Muriel turned around to see a rather young police lieutenant. Well, young was relative. He was probably close to middle aged. But for a police lieutenant, that was young.

"I'm Muriel," she said, and presented her British passport. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Oh, sorry, Your Grace. Our commander wants to know what we're supposed to do with these people," he said. "We just don't have the room for all of them."

"Good question. I've run into this problem before, and I think I can help. Are there any empty warehouses around here?" Muriel asked.

"Well, not that I know of," he replied. "Why?"

"Because, with the owner's permission, we could strengthen and adapt one to hold these men in individual cells. Home would be pleased to act as guards and provide food and clothing, and such, until the British legal system can handle them," she said. "We did this, before, in America when the influx of 'persons of interest' became too much for the local authorities to handle. Oh, the owner would be paid for the lease of the building. Perhaps I should talk to your commander directly," she added, smiling pleasantly.

"That won't be necessary, Muriel," Taylor said. "I've already called him. And, since this started as a military impersonation on their part, I think the military should have the opportunity to handle it. Lieutenant, if I could have your people process these individuals, the Regiment of Home will take custody of them and see to their well-being. One of the companies has set up a modified and self-contained version of a barracks for them."

"SIR! Yes, sir. I'll just notify my commander, Your Majesty," he said with warring emotions. He seemed relieved that someone else was taking charge of the mass of men, and VERY nervous that that someone else was his King. It never pays for people in low positions to attract the attention of the powerful.

"Relax, lieutenant. I know who your commander is," Taylor said. "I'll take care of it. I'll just give him a call and let him know what's happening." The lieutenant saluted, and fled.

"His commander is ex-Regiment. A good man, who simply felt that he'd had enough of military life and wanted to settle down. So we swatted him up with all the law and police procedures we could lay hands on, and he got the job directly," Taylor said. "Quite a success story, actually. Most of his troops are trained, now, I understand."

"Well, HE certainly was. Stripes clearly visible," Muriel said. "Polite enough guy. Didn't make assumptions. Asked for me by my full name, which is a bit unusual."

"Oh, that would be my fault. I wanted to leave you a way out if you didn't want to admit to who you actually were. And I caught that you handed him your British passport," Taylor grinned.

"Well, that might cause a bit of trouble, down the line. But I think it can be cleared up fairly quickly. I'm glad you found a place for all these people, though," she said. "Is there anything else you need me here for?"

"Nope. You've got this buttoned up quite well. Colonel Jackie is sending a contingent to cover the actual guard duties, which should thrill people, since they'll be riding in for the changing of the guard," Taylor said. "Why don't you go do your shopping or whatever."

"OK, I'll do that," Muriel grinned back at him, and she and her squads translated back to her office. "I think I'll wear a pants suit today. Got something casual you can put on?"

"Oh, I think I can find something," Mata said. "If all else fails, I can borrow something from you. Is there anything in particular you're looking for?"

"No, just looking in general. Oh, fashions, of course. But mostly people. I'd like to see how the training has affected the society and culture, and the economy," Muriel said.

"So, you want to hit stores, then. How about a shopping center?" asked Mata.

"Sounds good. Sounds like you have something in mind, too," Muriel said.

"Well, I just thought you might like to have lunch out, someplace," Mata replied.

"Will we need reservations?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. It's inside the shopping center, and caters to the walk-in crowd. It's a little early for lunch, which might make it easier," Mata said.

"OK. Let's go. You lead, since you have an idea of where you think I should go," Muriel said. They came out in a parking lot, but not too far from the building. "Oh, goodie! I get to walk!"

"Doggone children," Mata said. "Always expecting to have everything handed to them. For your information, young lady, it's somewhat crowded in there. I didn't want to translate on top of someone."

"Oh, I'm not complaining," Muriel said, swinging along in a ground-eating pace. "Though I'll admit it's unusual for me."

"Mind your manners, girl. We're supposed to be just ordinary civilians," Mata said.

"Oh, now you're crippling me. You mean I can't be outrageous? What IS going on, here?" Muriel asked.

"They're trying to drum up business by having a Christmas in July sale," Mata said. "They're even playing Christmas carols!"

"Da da da-a de da da da da," Muriel sang along with one. "Do Angels really sing?"

"Well, I don't. I imagine there are some that might. And I never could figure out what herald angels were," Mata replied.

"OH! That one's simple. Heralds are people that ride around on white horses that aren't horses. I bet a lot of them would have made good trainees," Muriel said.

"You're REALLY full of it, today," Mata said, laughing. "What HAS gotten into you?"

"Mata, how many times in the past nine years have I just been out on a lark?" Muriel asked.

"Point taken. OK, this way . . . and it should be just over there," Mata said.

As they approached the entrance to the restaurant, they heard a teenage boy say, "Mum, isn't that her?"

"Hush. It's not polite to point. And if it is her, so what? Isn't she allowed to be like other people? My goodness! I wouldn't want her job for anything. Always dashing here and there. Always in danger," the mother said. "Besides, what would she be doing here? And without people around her to protect her?"

"She's trained, mum. I can see the stripes," the boy said. "And the middle, the braid, is two colors. Green and red. Green . . . that would be the King. She used to have blue and red. And the blue was because she and the original Leader of Home were showing that they were working in the same direction."

"How do you know so much about it?" asked his mother.

"Oh, part of it was in the book that came with the action figures. You remember?"

Ambassadors All?" he asked. "Anyway, I've been following what she and her friends do. It's fascinating. Gee! I wish I could do the things she can."

::Mata, help me herd them into the restaurant. We've got a live one,:: Muriel sent. ::He can see my stripes, but I don't have them turned on for everyone. I want to know why HE can.:: Muriel walked over to the pair. "I couldn't help hearing, young man. And no, I wasn't trying to eavesdrop on you. But it isn't the first time I've had people think they recognized me and a parent was sure that it couldn't be. Hi. My name is Muriel, and I'd like to invite you to have lunch with me. My treat. And it wouldn't be an imposition to me. Won't you join me, please?"

"I TOLD you, mum. It IS her. Please, mum? Please?" the boy rattled off.

"Well . . . , " and his mother hesitated.

"If you're worried about the cost, don't," Muriel said. "I can't even spend the interest I have on my accumulated salary. And besides, this would be going on the Home account. When your son started speaking, I went back on the job. My job is to meet people and help them understand what Envoys are, and what the training is all about. That's the most important thing that I do."

"And be outrageous about it," Mata said, from the side.

"MATA! You'll scare them! I'm sorry, folks," she added to the pair, "I think she's trying to get back at me for some of the antics I've pulled in the past. Mata is my security chief. She's the head of four squads of five Envoys, each. But you know all about it, don't you, young man. Come. We'll talk and have lunch, and you can find out more." And she aimed for the restaurant. As they got to the door, someone spotted them, greeted them, and shortly they were at a table with menus in hand.

"Now, young man," Muriel said, when they'd ordered, "I've told you my name. What can I call you?"

"Oh. Sorry. I'm George. And you're really her?" he asked. Muriel just pulled out her Home passport and handed it to him, smiling as his eyes got bigger over her pulling it from a 'no pocket'.

"George, you're not trained, are you," Muriel made it a statement. "Is there a reason why? Religious or something?"

"Oh, nothing like that," his mother said. "Oh, I'm Mary. No, when he first asked about it he was too young. He's never said anything about it since."

"We've trained people as young as four," Muriel said. "I'll admit that it takes a little extra work, and they don't get the full training until they're old enough to handle it. But I was trained at twelve. And you, George"

He interrupted with, "You have TWO NAMES!" And Muriel laughed.

"Yes. I have two names. I'm human. So . . . what's the difference between humans and Envoys?" Muriel asked.

George looked back and forth between Muriel and Mata. Finally, he said, "She's brighter than you are. And you're kinda gray."

"Good. Got it in one. What you're seeing is the glow given off by our souls. Humans have to connect to power to make theirs visible. Envoys ARE power. Intelligent power. All the people in my squads are Envoys. And Mata's the head of them," she said, taking back her passport by pulling it out of a 'no pocket' again. "Envoys don't have a body. They just look and feel like they do. But they can turn it off," and Mata obliged by slowly disappearing, then reappearing, "or on at will. And before you go looking for my squads, they aren't here. I have a shield on me that would stop a tank. In fact, it has. And bullets, and bomblets and knives and . . . well bunches of dangerous things."

"Mary," she suddenly shifted to the boy's mother, "your son is trainable. Not everyone is. But he is. And he's at an age where it could be done QUITE safely and easily. He shouldn't have been able to see my stripes. I don't have them turned on so everyone can see them. So, only trained people would know that I'm trained. Yet, he saw them. And he could see our souls. But he's young. It would need your permission to train him. As well as his, but I don't think that would be a problem, considering what he said, earlier. Now, before you panic, it doesn't cost anything, it doesn't take a long time, it only hurts once, and that's making the initial connection, and it's possible that even that can be eliminated. And you can watch all of it except for one time, when he learns to make clothes. And even I won't watch that. I'll get a male Envoy or a human male to help with that."

And once again, Muriel saw 'that look' on a child's face. He wanted. In a big way. He wanted the training so he could be like others that he'd idolized for so long.

"Well . . . George? You really want this?" Mary asked, unnecessarily.

"Yes, please, mum," he replied

"Well . . . how long will it take?" she asked.

"Maybe a couple of hours. I think I can short-circuit a lot of it. So most of it would be in learning to make clothes, and in getting practice in a few things," Muriel said. "Then he can come back any time and get more practice and confidence. Is there somewhere you have to be?"

"No, not really. We were just seeing if we could pick up school clothes for him while the bargains were on," she said.

"Well, we can solve that problem for you. You'll never have to buy clothes for him again. So, let's finish lunch, and we'll go back to my office," Muriel said, smiling.

Chapter 24

Unexpected Help

(Friday afternoon)

::Muriel,:: Mata sent, ::three men. One at the door, one about halfway back, one going for the register::

::SQUADS! Lock it down. Mata, get the police.:: “George, Mary, we're about to have a bit of excitement. Don't worry, no one will be hurt,” Muriel quietly said. And on the heels of that, twenty Envoys were suddenly there. Two stood at the door and gently asked people to wait and stay out of the way. Seconds later, four policemen arrived. And Taylor. And behind him, five members of the Regiment of Home, and they weren't smiling.

“Oh, hon, you didn't need to come. It's all under control,” Muriel said. George and Mary's mouths simply dropped open.

“I can't let you go anywhere, can I,” Taylor said. “OH! A new one? Congratulations. Muriel, you're going to need a man to help with him. Let me know when you get back.”

“I don't want to take you away from your work, Taylor,” Muriel said, watching George and Mary's eyes widen even more. “Oh, I'm sorry. George, Mary, this is Taylor – well His Majesty, Taylor the First, King of Britain, if you insist. Can you trust him to help train your son, Mary?” And Taylor sputtered.

“OK, now that's just being outrageous,” Taylor said. “George, Mary, I'm pleased to meet you. And if George would like, I'd be happy to teach him how to make clothes. And no, it wouldn't be taking me away from anything. At least not anything that can't wait for something important like this. Muriel, are you going to unlock the place, now? The police have them in custody.”

“Oh, I suppose,” Muriel said, like a reluctant child, “if I must.” And as suddenly as they appeared her squads, all but the two at the door, translated out. The two at the door thanked the people for waiting, and motioned that they should go in. Then they, too, translated out.

“And what would you have done if I hadn't arrived?” Taylor asked.

“Dealt with it. As I always have,” Muriel said. “Actually, that was overkill. Mata and I could have handled it alone. This was mostly for show. 'There's a new sheriff in town' sort of thing. After all, how often is it that bright, glowing figures appear when someone wants to rob a place. Oh, here's the record, if you want to send it off to the media. I left you out of it, though.”

“OK, I'll send it out. THIS should stir up some interest. Maybe more citizens will take an interest in stopping such behavior,” Taylor said.

"That's the hope. And if they don't know how, they can always come out and we'll teach them," Muriel replied. "And here's our waiter with the check."

Except that it wasn't JUST the waiter. The manager was hot on his heels. "Madam Ambassador! Welcome. If we'd known it was you, we would have told you sooner. There'll be no charge for your meals. Our pleasure to serve you," the manager said.

"You won't make money that way," Muriel said.

"Oh, I make enough. And it isn't often that we get such distinguished guests, here," he replied. "And that was your doing, stopping those men, wasn't it?"

"Well, we all do what we can. I apologize for the disturbance," Muriel said. "I probably could have handled it without my squads coming."

"No, ma'am, don't apologize. You just let people know that it can be done. As I know you can tell, I'm trained. So is most of my staff. This won't happen again," he said.

"Mata you know my methods. Did you ever make a dump of it?" Muriel asked.

"Yep. Sir, if I may link to you, you'll have how to stop such situations, and be able to train others in it," Mata said. He agreed, and she passed the information to him. "Now remember, you are NOT the police. Just neutralize and immobilize, then call the police. Let them handle the rest."

"I'll do that. And thank you." And he and the waiter left.

"Well! I guess that takes care of that. How about a little trip, then, and we'll take care of training this young man," Taylor said. "And I guess I see how I rate. He bee-lined to you and never noticed me," he added, laughing.

"Well, that's because you aren't as pretty," Muriel replied, which caused George to choke on his laughter. "It's all right, George. We're ALWAYS like this. And you're allowed to laugh."

And a moment later, they were standing in Muriel's casual area. And George's eyes bugged out again. He was staring everywhere, but mostly at the diplomas on her wall and the sculptures behind her desk.

"You did those?" he half exclaimed.

"What? Oh, those? Yea. They're in order of when I made them. Those are the miniatures," Muriel said. "If you've been to the British Enclave, then you've seen the larger version of one of them. One of my friends, an Envoy in the American Enclave, enlarged it for me and smoothed out some of the wrinkles and textures. Now, young man, to business. I told you that Envoys are power. Intelligent power. That's all a soul is." And she never got any further. He made the connection just like that. A blink, then he suddenly seemed to

come into focus and stood up straighter.

“You should be able to contact me, mentally, now,” Muriel said.

::Can I?::

::You did. And without pain, since now you have the power to support it::

“And now, you'll see why the connection is so important. The rest is either taught or monitored through that connection. And next is shields,” Muriel said, and passed him how to make the changes. Five minutes later, two things happened. First was that Don arrived, swinging for proof of another successful shield. The second was Fran checking George's health.

Mary's eyes were even wider, if possible. “I've seen you two, before!” she exclaimed. “In that set of action figures he has!”

“Yes. I'm Fran, and I'm a doctor,” she said, extending her hand. “And the other man is my boyfriend Don. He's a trainer in Envoy techniques – well, we all are, but he's the best. He's the one we call on if there's any possibility of problems. He's also a teacher of history to kids that can't make the link. Fewer now, thank goodness, but still a job.”

“You're a doctor?” Mary said.

“Yep. Since I was twelve,” Fran said. “It's Envoy style medicine. No cutting, no nasty potions or pills. No long recovery times or expensive procedures. Mostly, just a handshake. The worst was a man who's heart had stopped. He lived. I was twelve, and that was my first major operation. He was up, walking around in five minutes.”

“You're showing off,” Muriel grinned.

“Of course. Gotta keep up with YOUR showing off, don't I?” Fran quipped.

“Well, that one was good. But I thought one of the best was the time both you and Don worked on that kid with a broken leg. You taking care of the break, and Don keeping the kid and his parents occupied while you did it,” Muriel said.

“Yea, that was a trip. Poor kid. I STILL don't know how he managed to break it,” Fran replied. “Muriel, you need a doctor here.”

“I know. There are several things I need here. But I'm not sure where we could set it up. Not really an Enclave. Not like America or what Taylor did here. Just someplace for the support structure,” Muriel said.

“OK, let me think about it. Me, and a dozen others, that is. We'll work something out. In the mean time, holler if you need me,” Fran said. “Now, Muriel, there's something that you need to think about, too.”

"I have. It can't be done. Not and be a legal tie by the laws of the United States or of Arizona. Why? Because I can't be considered eligible to perform marriages as the Leader of Home. HOWEVER," she said and paused, "there is a dodge that can be used. And it's the same one that I used. Be married by the rules and regulations of Home."

"But you WEREN'T . . . oh."

"Yea. Oh. I can declare that a consort-ship is a legal binding on two people. Then, as long as you meet all the requirements of Home, the United States would be honor bound to accept it." And Fran started laughing. "The down side is that some places might try to argue it in court. Since you're Citizens of Home, that should take care of that. If you're willing to face that possibility, then name a day. Oh, and tell Carla and Jeff the same thing."

"Whoosh! OK. Let me get with them. We'll do a double. GAD! Girl. That's nasty. What you're saying is that, because you're the acknowledged Leader of Home, you can simply declare that it's valid. And since Don and I are Citizens of Home, there's nothing they can do to say it ISN'T valid." And she started laughing again. Don just grinned, foolishly.

"Yep. You got it. Now, why don't you two go share the good news, so I can get this poor boy finished up," said Muriel. They didn't wait. Don and Fran just joined hands and blinked out. You could almost smell the scorched air behind them when they left.

Taylor took George aside and taught him how to make his own cloths, and provided him with a suitcase to carry the ones he had been wearing, complete with Home logo. Then, because he knew Britain better than Muriel did, checked the boy on translating on earth, including to a couple of places that the boy didn't know. Then had him go to Home and back. George was quick. All of it was done in a half hour, and he was back with his mother and Muriel.

"Sorry, Muriel. I went ahead and finished him up," Taylor said, on their return.

"Oh, gad! I've been made superfluous. OK, coffee, tea, hot chocolate? Or some barbaric American soda? Sit, George. Let the experience wash through you," Muriel said. "Taylor, you're slipping. You didn't give him his stripes. Which means that you probably didn't give him his passport, either."

"SHEESH! Henpecked! It's not my fault! The check is in the mail! I told them to fix it!" he rattled off, and they laughed. "Seriously, I thought he might like you to do the honors. Or at least have the ability to make a choice."

"Ah! Well, in that case, George," Muriel said, "who would you like to have give you your stripes and who give you your passport. Now remember, Taylor is King of Britain. But I'm the Leader of a whole other world – a whole other universe." And George started laughing.

"Can he even DO that? I mean, he's the King. Not an Ambassador," Mary said.

"Any Ambassador can hand out passports. Any one that trains can apply the stripes. The only reason for it being only Ambassadors that hand out passports is because the Home Logo has to be applied to the certification of Citizenship, and only Ambassadors know the trick," Muriel said. "And yes, Taylor is still an Ambassador. Upon being declared King, he was downgraded to liaison, so he's no longer the Ambassador to Britain. And all that means is that he's the one that talks to me about problems or whatever that affects both Home and Britain. The woman that took over as head of the Regiment of Home is now the Ambassador to Britain."

"Um . . . whose name goes on the passport?" asked George.

"Oh, now THAT'S cutting to the chase. Whoever issues the passport signs it, usually," Taylor said, laughing. "And that's a GOOD question."

"Um . . . if you don't mind, I'd like His Majesty to give me my stripes. But I'd like you to give me my passport," he said to Muriel.

"No problem. And I can understand why," Muriel said.

"Yes, but he had been doing so well, calling me Taylor instead of 'Your Majesty'. Ah, well. Maybe this will remind him. Come, George, out here where there's some room. Yes. Good. Now, if you would kneel, please? That's left knee down, and right one up, and I'll tell you why, in a moment. Now, do you have a gem in mind?" asked Taylor.

"Yes, sir. The same as yours, if you don't mind. Sir," George stammered out.

"Ah. Good. That will be easy for me, then. And your last name?"

"Whitestone, sir."

And Taylor switched to the formal whites with the fly plaid and sword. And crown. "Then George Whitestone, be it hereby known that you shall be known as Extra Knight Companion of the Garter," Taylor said, and touched his sword to each of the boy's shoulders. And when he did, the stripes appeared where the sword had touched. "This is an award normally given to foreign people classed as royalty. But in you, I've seen something more royal than in any of those that have born the title before. And now, I'll tell you why a knight or knight candidate kneels like that," Taylor said sheathing the sword. And from one side, Saul appeared with a smaller sword and scabbard and belt.

"Rise, Sir George," he said, gently. And when the boy rose, Taylor buckled the sword and belt to the boy. "Now, George, the reason that a knight kneels on his left knee is because he is always ready to defend his monarch. Were his left knee raised, it could interfere with drawing his sword. Were he on both knees, he would have difficulty in getting quickly to his feet. This particular sword is not sharp, and intentionally so. Neither you nor anyone else can be hurt by it. But it makes for a nice wall decoration."

Saul handed Taylor another object, a rolled parchment, and Taylor opened it out for George to see. "This goes with your new award, George. Just tuck it in a 'no pocket' and retrieve it when you get home. Let me know if you want it framed. That's easily done. And you know how to contact me. Now am I Taylor?" he asked, plaintively.

And George had tears in his eyes. "Yes, Taylor. If that is your wish. Though in public I should probably stick to 'Your Majesty'."

"Oh, NOW you've done it," Muriel said. "HOW am I supposed to compete with THAT? Ah well, George, when you get around to it, there is a little green booklet in your 'no pocket'. You are a Citizen of Home, and can return any time you like. You will also find that any time you visit an Enclave – anywhere in the world – that you will not be charged for anything. That is because those Enclaves are each a tiny portion of Home. And one doesn't pay when one is Home."

Chapter 25

The Consorting Preliminaries

(Monday morning)

The rest of Friday afternoon was filled with getting George Whitestone educated beyond his years. Oh, and training his mother too, as it turned out that she, too, had connected when George did. And, after everything was finally done, Taylor and Muriel took them home, translating them to their door.

“Now remember, the techniques you’ve learned are to be used,” Muriel said. “You are both in touch with your balance. Use it. It will help you know if there are negative consequences to your actions. But for ordinary things, like washing dishes or changing clothes, you won’t have to worry about it. And you can contact me at any time for help or further information.”

Saturday was the worst day that she’d ever had. She spent the day in her recliner trying, unsuccessfully, to come up with the proper words for a double consorting. And got frustrated the more she tried. Had she been writing these attempts at a speech on paper, it would have taken someone with a shovel to reach her through all the rejected and tossed attempts littering the floor.

Sunday wasn’t any better, thought the location was different. She tried looking at what various religions used. She tried looking at what various secular officials used. And all she got was something that sounded stuffy and stilted.

Now, it was Monday, and she had NO idea what she was going to say, and was depressed. She knew the setting – that large open square just inside the front gate of the American Enclave. She had the documents for them to sign. She had the stands for them, and for her notes, already set up. What she didn’t have was a way to make this smooth and personal to each of them without sounding like all the officious oafs portrayed in movies and television.

“Muriel, stop it!” Mata said. “You’re over-thinking it. Look. Just put down the points you want to touch on. This isn’t a contract, it’s an acknowledgement of a fact for the purpose of giving stupid human governments something that they can say is official. So, acknowledge the positives and ignore the governments attempts to interfere.”

“What?” asked Muriel.

“OK. First, they’re adults that have chosen to be friends and have worked at that relationship for years. Second, they care about each other and defend each other. They share what comes along in life and work out the problems. Your documents for them to sign don’t even have a place for a date! You’re simply saying that they ARE consorts, not that you’re making them consorts. And you’ve watched this develop over time. That’s IT,” Mata said. “Just put down the points, and talk about them without thinking about them. When you

go to talk to media, you don't spend hours coming up with a speech. You just go and give them the facts. And every time, it's that that confounds them. This time is easier. You're talking to FRIENDS. No act. No speech. Just talk."

"Oh."

"Yea. 'OH'. Why don't you just go to America and get reconnected with your friends. Maybe you can calm THEM down. Take Taylor with you. He needs to reconnect to life as much as you do. I can understand why kings and queens in the past went quietly crazy in here. This pile of rock is enough to depress anyone," Mata grumped.

"How about you? Aren't you coming?" asked Muriel.

"Darned tootin' I'm coming. I wouldn't miss this for anything," Mata said. "You know, when you first brought your friends out to Enclave I thought there were going to be serious problems with that many kids. I was wrong. The kids weren't the problem. Many times, they were the solution. I didn't think you could train them. You trained them. I didn't think they'd grow up to be anything – I thought they were just going to coast through life on what you handed them. Instead, they each went their own way while still staying together. And now, four of them are saying, 'hey world, we've decided that we're a pair. Tough if you don't like it'. And I'm cheering! I LOVE being proven wrong like this."

"Hmm. Yea. I see what you mean. They HAVE come a long way. And they're family. To each other and to me," Muriel reflected. "And you're right. All I'm doing is providing a document for them, not actually DOING anything. Maybe I ought to change the wording of that document."

"Nope. The world outside the gates needs something officious. That fills the bill, nicely," Mata said. "And it does it without really saying anything, which is even better. What you can give them is the acknowledgement of the love that they share. For want of a better word, your blessing. That's all they really want. To know that their 'mother' approves of what they've already gone and done."

"Thanks, Mata," Muriel said, quietly. "I think I know what to say, now."

"Good! Then I can get back to work and get this stuff cleaned up before the squads and I go," Mata said. Muriel looked at her, then went over and hugged her.

As she went back to her office, the two pairs translated in. "Hey, girl! Aren't you supposed to counsel us, or something?" asked Carla.

"Yea. Right. Like THAT'S going to happen. What do you think I am? Your mother?" asked Muriel.

"Well, no, I thought you were the one that had to make sure that we were doing things the right way," Carla said.

"Heck, if you haven't figured out the right way by now, then there's nothing I can do about it," Muriel tossed back.

"Goof! That's not what I meant," Carla said.

"Isn't it? In all this time, haven't you figured out how to get along? How to talk out problems and find other solutions? Haven't you figured out how to care about each other?" asked Muriel.

"Huh! I guess I was wrong."

"Naw. I just tossed that stuff at you to make you feel foolish," Muriel grinned.

"So, how do you manage with Taylor?" Fran asked as Carla growled.

"Oh, I just wound him up tight until he started standing up for himself. When he reached that point I stopped," Muriel said. "He's still got some standing up to do."

"I wouldn't expect that that's too hard for him," Fran said. And Muriel smiled.

"Harder than you think," she said.

"Oh? Tell us about it," Fran said with a leer.

"Well, he still hasn't broken free of following me around like a puppy dog," Muriel said. "But he's getting better at telling off politicians and such. He's also becoming more responsive to the general public, though he still has a tendency to come roaring in with the Regiment. I notice that Don and Jeff haven't said anything," she added.

"That's because we've been on the wrong side of your zingers often enough to know better," Don said, grinning. "However, I'd like to know what you AREN'T telling us."

"Well . . . so you really want to go there, huh?" Muriel asked. "OK. This is it. You four have been paired off for long enough that my passing down an edict that you are consorted is ridiculous. The only thing I can do is acknowledge what already exists. And that's ALL I'm doing. You're old enough and smart enough to know the consequences of your actions. And you're each nuts enough to choose a partner that has as strong a personality as you do. Which means that if it ever DID come to an argument there wouldn't be any place on earth that would be safe. And you know it, which leads me to believe that you are all smarter than I thought, and have figured out a way to keep from arguing. That you care about each other is obvious to everyone. So, there's really nothing more to say."

"Jeff, were we just insulted? Or complimented," asked Don.

"I'm staying out of this. Knowing Muriel, it was probably both and neither, and without being contradictory," Jeff said, laughing. And Mata once more decorated her monitor with grape and berry combination.

"So, that's what you're going to say?" asked Fran.

"Look at the forms I made up. NO DATE!" Muriel said. "I'm simply acknowledging what already exists. And the ONLY reason I'm doing it is to keep you out of trouble with the governments of earth. Oh, and sign them, unless you're thinking of backing out."

"Geez! She's serious," said Carla. "No talk. Just lots of quips and innuendos, and a straight explanation. This is scary."

"No more so than your actual decision to become consorts," Muriel said. "Come on, people. You're adults. You know what you're doing as well as anybody who gets married does. In fact, probably better. You're brave. You're intelligent. You care about people and you care about each other. What more is there? Illnesses? Not with Fran around. Mental incompetence? Well, there you've got me. After all, you hang around ME." And Mata moved her cup out of reach, as the other four laughed. "We're the same age. If you're looking for wisdom, then you'll have to go elsewhere. Hey, I'm going through this, myself. All any of us can do is feel our way through it, and face situations as they come up."

"You've got help," Mata suddenly said. "All of you. You've got your Envoys. We may not know everything. But there's a lot that we DO know. And a lot more that we can find out."

Muriel just looked at Mata for a moment, then went over and hugged her. "Have I said 'thank you' to you, lately, for all the help you give me?" she asked.

"Not needed. I know," Mata said, smiling. "Every time you take one of my suggestions you show it. And very often you turn things around for someone in the process. Every time you come up with something new, you're saying 'thank you'. And so am I. I had NO idea, when Ted asked for a volunteer, what I'd be getting into. But as hard as I've had to work, it was because I was trying to keep up with you. And that's made me grow beyond what I was. It's made ALL the Envoys stretch. Where before we had a tendency to say that there wasn't anything we could do, because the little stuff we didn't know how to do and the big stuff was beyond our capability, you dove in and showed us how. Big or little, you just keep going and giving."

"Me? I'm just a girl!" Muriel said.

"Uh, huh. Like Jeff is just a guy. A guy that throws off new inventions like a loose electric wire throws off sparks. Or Don, with his ability to teach. I remember when he couldn't remember ANYTHING about history. Now, he teaches it. You. Just a girl. A girl that has revolutionized so many aspects of Envoys and humans lives either directly or indirectly," Mata said. "Yea. Right. I don't believe that you're just a girl. And neither does anybody else! Now, get out of here and go see what kind of trouble you can get into setting up for your little speech."

"What about you?" asked Muriel.

"I'll be along later. Take a squad with you. You KNOW how you can't trust those Americans. Savages, all of them," Mata said, grinning. "Take squad three. They don't get out as much."

"OK. I guess. Do you really think that I'll need them to keep me out of trouble?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, heck no. Nothing keeps you out of trouble. But they might lend some comic relief," Mata said. And Muriel hit her. Mata just laughed. Muriel and company translated out, with Muriel still growling, to the American Enclave.

"Oh, my," Muriel said. "Somebody's been busy."

"Yea, isn't it amazing what twenty-four Envoys can do in a short period of time," Carla said. "Ted restricted the number of visitors, today, so people wouldn't be knocking things over."

"How'd he do that?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, he just had the media say that Enclave was closed for a private event," Carla said, breezily. "So, mostly it's just the four families, the friends and whatever of their families want to attend, Ted, and all the Envoys. We may get some visitors from Guest House in the mix, drawn in by what's happening, but I don't expect too many of them. Oh, and SOME media."

"Four families?" asked Muriel.

"Sure. Don's, Jeff's, mine, and your parents are standing in for Fran since they're the closest thing to family that she's got," Carla said.

"OH! Oh, that's great! I've got a question, Carla," Muriel said. "Should we raise the front up so everyone will be able to see you guys?"

"Yea. After we come in. Don't worry, my squad knows what to do," Carla assured her. "We've even got stands to put the forms on. Don't worry, nobody but us will be able to touch them. They'll be under shields."

"Good idea. Are you going to leave them there for a while?"

"Well, at least until after the reception. Hey! Stop worrying. Nothing formal," Carla said. "Just be yourself, and it'll all work out."

"So, who took over my old office?" asked Muriel.

"No one. Ted decided that you should always be able to come back here for whatever reason," Don said. "Same with your apartment. No, he didn't think that you and Taylor would break up. He was thinking more of the fact that, as this was your first office, it would be the place that many people would come looking for you. Or that, in visiting, you'd just like to have

a familiar place to stay. So what you've got in Britain is a duplicate office. And the two are synchronized. Anything you put up, there, is duplicated here. The only thing that isn't actually duplicated are the walls and organization."

"Yea," Jeff said. "So you can always wait there, if you want to."

"Why? What time is this set for?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, we figured eleven thirty. The restaurants around will be providing lunch to everyone," Fran said.

"OK, NOW you're scaring me," Muriel said. "I didn't know this was going to be a whole production."

"It isn't a production. Honest," Carla said. "It's just . . ."

"THERE SHE IS! GET HER!" a male voice rang out. And four men advanced on Muriel.

"AH! Excitement!" Muriel murmured. "I have something to do! Oh, goodie."

Chapter 26

The Ceremony

(Monday morning, afternoon)

"Muriel White," the man said, "we're taking you in."

"Really? What for?" she replied.

"For entering the country illegally," he said.

"Uh, huh. Interesting. You DO know that you're in an Embassy, don't you? And that I'm an Ambassador," she said.

"Doesn't matter. In this state, you either enter legally or you'll be found and deported back to where you come from," he replied.

"Really! Deported to where? I'm an American citizen, so I'm already there. Or do you mean Home?" she asked. "How would you propose to send me there? Are you going to take me?"

"Don't you try none of that stuff with me, girl," he said. "You just come along quietly, and you won't be hurt."

"Uh, huh. Sorry, I've got things to do," she replied. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave without me."

"Grab her, guys. We'll show these people that they can't get away with it," he said. Two men went for her. When the first tried to grab her arm, he suddenly launched through the air and landed ten feet away, to the accompaniment of a sharp >CRACK<.

"That did it!" the man said, and three of them pulled out guns. The fourth tried to get to his feet. "You come along now, and no more tricks. I really don't care if we take you out of here alive or dead."

"Really! Well, sorry mister, but I'm not going," Muriel said. "And you're not police of any form. You're one of those border vigilante groups, aren't you. Sorry-ass dumb shits that aren't in touch with the world and have no backing. And, you've broken the peace of Home." By this time, a large crowd of humans and Envoys had gathered around the area, including Bob Garcia and Ted and their Envoys.

"Yea? Well, I'll break something," he said, and fired. The bullet stopped a foot from Muriel.

Muriel picked the bullet out of her shield. "Bob, any reason to turn these people over to the locals?"

"Well," Bob said, "it might cause talk if you just eliminated them. They probably have family."

"Good point. OK, would you see to their disposition, please?" asked Muriel.

"Sure thing. We'll keep them comfy until Tex can get here," Bob said. "He's tied up with something or he'd have been here by now."

"Thanks, Bob," she said, smiling. "Hi, Ted. I see you're in charge of the entertainment. Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right. What IS it about the politics of this state, that we have such buffoons? And now, here I am, stuck in the middle with you. Well done!" And Ted started laughing.

"Oh, Muriel! You've still got it," Ted said, still chuckling.

"Gallows humor, Ted. When I see idiocy like this, I just break out in it, all over," she grinned back. "And your shtick used to be growling. What happened?"

"My fault. I'm not used to you being around any more," he said. "And your humor is getting subtler. I doubt if there's too many people that remember that old song. And to compare it to state politics is delightful."

"Excuse me, sir. I can take them off your hands, if you like." The man that spoke wore the uniform of the Pinal County Sheriff's Department.

"Well," Ted said, "we might, except that the last time I knew the Pinal County Sheriff's Department didn't have Envoy trained men. Whereas the State does. I think we'll wait for them. Thanks anyway."

"I really must insist, sir. Your compound is in Pinal County, and therefore subject to our laws," the deputy said.

"Oh, my," Muriel said. "That was resolved YEARS ago. This property is owned by Home, and is an Embassy. You have no authority, here."

"Excuse me, miss, but I was talking to the Ambassador." Muriel just raised her eyebrows.

Ted said, "Bob, would you hold this man, too, until we can determine if he actually is a deputy? And we'll wait for Tex to show up to see about the disposition of the others."

"Sir, I'm afraid you can't do that. It would be interfering with an officer in the performance of his duties," the deputy said.

"Except for one thing. Maybe two," Muriel said. "First, you aren't in your jurisdiction. This property operates under Home rule, as set forth by the Leader of Home and documented

in the Treaty of Home. Second, and you're not going to like this, I'M the Leader of Home," and she pulled out her passport. "So, you see, your behavior has raised questions in our minds. Why would a deputy suddenly show up when these men were arrested, and why would you be so adamant that you should be the one to take them in. Don't worry. We'll get this sorted out."

The deputy took a step back and started to turn, while saying, "Um . . . I'll just be leaving now." And that's as far as he got. One of Bob's troops had him in a shield that wouldn't allow further movement.

And Tex chose that moment to appear. "Hey there, Muriel. Haven't seen you for a bit. How's life treating you?"

"Not bad, Tex. And you?"

"Oh, fair to middlin', I guess. So, today's the day for the big show, huh?" he asked, while his men cuffed the first batch.

"Yea," she grinned. "And Ted even provided entertainment for me. Say Tex, would you happen to know if this one is actually a deputy?"

"Matter of fact, I DO know. He's not. He's part of that bunch over there. So, what's with that bunch?" Tex asked.

"Attempted kidnapping, assault with a deadly weapon. This one you can have for impersonating an officer," Muriel said. "I take it that you've had some dealings with this bunch?"

"OH, yea. I think this time we'll just roll them up and let the courts figure it out." He shook his head. "Sometimes this state is more trouble than it's worth," he said. "But it sure beats working for a living. Wa-al, I'd better get back to my real job before the boss finds out that I was goofing off on the job," he said, and translated out with the assorted alleged personages.

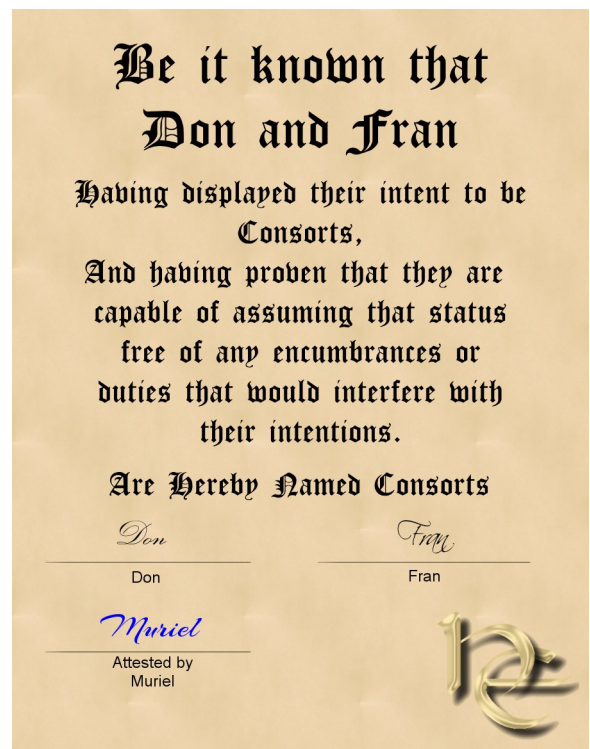
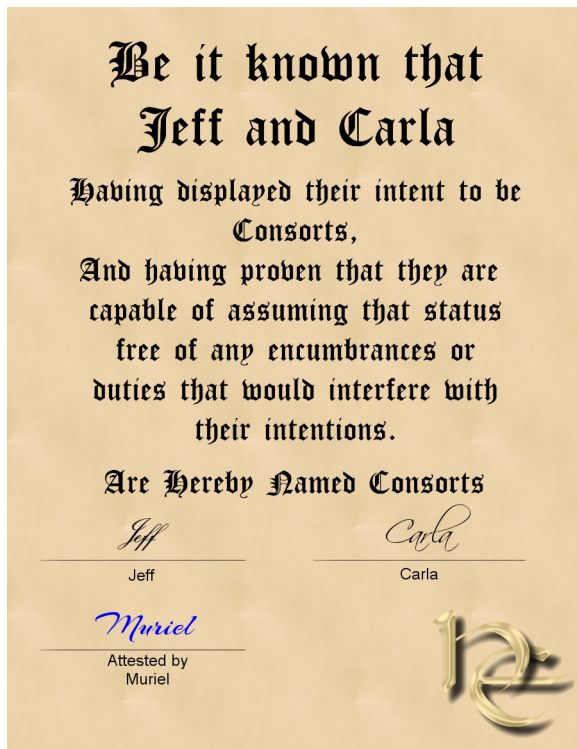
"Hey! It's getting close to time," Don said. "Must be. My parents just arrived." And he took off at a run to meet them and get them seated. Jeff and Carla also departed to see to their parents, leaving Fran looking a bit down.

"Is this a private party, or can anybody join," asked Lily, translating in with her husband. "Oh, Fran! You didn't think we'd forget our adopted daughter, did you? You're the best thing that happened to us since Muriel. And you're less trouble, too!" Which got a smile out of Fran, who immediately went to her and hugged her.

"Thanks, Lily. I needed that," Fran said, while being sandwiched between three people. "Come on. I know where you're sitting. You don't mind sitting by Don's parents, do you?"

"Nope. We've met, and we're friends," Fred said. "GOOD people. And really dedicated to their family. I don't know if you realize it, but that's the reason they wouldn't come into Enclave, way back when. They wanted the rest of the kids to have as normal a childhood as they could. That's about to change, though. The last one is on his way to Washington State for a job. Well, you know. You helped train the brood. And he's proud as punch over his engineering degree."

"Oh, gee. Almost forgot," Muriel said, and pulled the documents out of a 'no pocket' and placed them on the stands. "Glad I got them to sign them."



Frank came up to Muriel and quietly said, "They're going to need frames for those. No sweat. I'll take care of it after everything is done. I've got just the thing in mind for them. Oh, and can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure. Any time. YOU know that," Muriel grinned.

"Formals. And make them white instead of light gray. Oh, you can leave the parts red that you normally do. But I have it on good authority that that's what the two couples are going to do," Frank said. "The fairy dust and iridescence is fine."

"Hmm. I may just change to using that for any formal work. Thanks, Frank," Muriel said, and changed to white formal with the kilts. "Now, I think it's time for me to go to work. Looks like everyone that's coming is here, and the couples are coming back up."

"Then I'll scoot and let you have fun," he smiled warmly back at her. Muriel looked out

over the crowd as Don and Fran, and Jeff and Carla took their places.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Muriel projected. “This is going to be a bit unusual for you. Mainly, because this isn’t a wedding. Nor is it formal. Nor is it a ceremony to create a situation. This is simply an acknowledgment of what already exists. Don and Fran, and Jeff and Carla have decided to be consorts – partners. They’ve thought about it, worked out problems that might have come up, and felt that they would like to be more than just friends. Oh, the friendship still remains. It’s just stronger than ever. They’ve shown that they care about each other and look out for each other. All four of them are intelligent. All four of them have jobs that they enjoy doing. And all four of them have found ways to help their partner in his or her work.”

“So, why consorts rather than marriage? Because marriage is a contract, and a rather one-sided one at that. The way marriages are handled outside the gates of Enclave, the woman is expected to be subservient to the man. Well, if you know anything about these four people, you know that THAT’S just not going to happen. But by becoming consorts, they show that they’re equal partners, committed to working together to make the partnership succeed. Now, that doesn’t mean that everything will go smoothly. It may. It may not. What it does mean is that they’ll meet any problems together and deal with them.”

“So why are we here? Not to tell them how they’re supposed to behave. They have already worked that out. Not to formalize it and make it official. They really don’t need that, either. But what they do need is something to show the outside world that it IS a partnership. And that’s something I can do. I can, as Leader of Home, and we can, as their friends and family, acknowledge that they’re consorts with each other. I can give them a piece of parchment that tells the outside world to butt out – it’s none of their business, because they are Citizens of Home, and Home accepts their decisions and their status.”

“And I can also say, Jeff and Carla – Don and Fran, congratulations to both of you pair. And now you can stop hiding from the cops,” Muriel finished up, drawing laughter from the crowd. As she moved to hug Don and Fran, she saw another white uniform, and grinned. Taylor had been sitting at the back of the crowd, and now came forward to congratulate the pair of pairs. Minus the crown, she noted. And Envoys escorted people to the side to clear the area for tables and chairs for lunch.

As Muriel went to Jeff and Carla, Carla said, “THAT was GREAT! You weren’t speaking to us, you were speaking to the audience, and letting THEM know what was going on. And you were worried that it wouldn’t go well. SHAME on you.” And Muriel laughed.

“Dear,” Taylor said, “I believe we’re in the way of setting up the main table.

“Oops. Yep. Let’s get over here, out of the way,” Muriel blushed. And, as soon as they moved, the table was set up. The two couples were seated at the center, and Ted was placed on one side. Muriel and Taylor were seated on the other side. “Hmm. This seems familiar. Back where we started.” Muriel grinned.

“Yes, but this time you don’t have to shield me from everybody else’s stray thoughts,”

Taylor said. "By the way, I like the new look."

"DO you. Frank suggested I change, since those four were going to use white," Muriel said. "I'm thinking of keeping it this way. Kinda matches you."

"Oh, now that would be nice," Taylor said, smiling. "And if that doesn't shock the government, I don't know what will. Two of us in whites, and radiating like beacons."

"One set of books I read called them 'oh, shoot me now' uniforms," Muriel said. "But that's something I'm used to. And it's only for the formals. The Class 'A's' and utilities will stay gray."

"Sounds reasonable," Taylor said.

Chapter 27

The Aftermath (Tuesday morning)

Taylor and Muriel had done their morning exercises together, and were just finishing their run when a car pulled up in front. "I thought you didn't have any meetings, today," Muriel said.

"Nope. Nothing scheduled. You?" asked Taylor.

"Nope. Let's shower. It looks like it might be a rough morning. Janice can handle them until we get there," Taylor said. And they translated directly to their bathroom. And mentally thanked Carla again. When she'd designed their quarters, she'd included TWO showers and TWO tubs that could double as a jacuzzi or hot tub. And since they were on a converter, the water was instantly the temperature that they preferred. Shortly, they were sweat free and feeling better for the warm massage of their muscles, and were dressed ready to meet the day.

"I have a hunch, from something Janice said last night, what this is about. You don't have to stay, if you don't want to," Taylor said.

"Well, we'll see," Muriel said. "I wouldn't want to leave you to face their tender mercies alone. Especially, from what you've said and haven't said, I'd say it concerns me."

So they walked side by side to the door to his office, where he opened it for Muriel to go first, as any gentleman would. It also happened to align with proper procedures for allowing the ranking party to precede those of lower rank. Muriel immediately went to her normal chair, noting on passing that the men didn't rise until Taylor entered the room, and didn't sit until after he was seated.

"Your Majesty, we were here, yesterday, on a matter of some importance, only to find that you were flitting about, somewhere. We had to come back this morning and HOPE that you'd returned to your duties. To be brief, when are you going to get rid of this ridiculous woman and marry properly," one of them said. Muriel thought 'oh, my'. Taylor just raised his eyebrows and held silent for some long minutes.

Finally, Taylor said, quietly, "Can any of the rest of you tell me what mistakes this . . . person . . . has made with his opening remarks? No? Well, allow me to instruct you on proper procedure. First, gentlemen, you did not make an appointment to see me. Instead, you presumed that I would be at your beck and call. And you did that twice. Second, none of you have introduced yourselves, though I have a hunch who you are and will confirm it, shortly. Like just before I send a record of this meeting and your disastrous results to the media to have fun with." This caused several of the men to blanch. "And thirdly, Muriel is my Consort. My partner, as far as personal relations go. I have no intention of breaking that partnership, nor do I have any intention of marrying the sort of girl I'm sure you think would be

appropriate. I went through this discussion with my parents, even though I was of age – a fully adult person. I also went through it with my grandmother, the former Queen, and Parliament. I see no need to go through it again. Muriel is my Consort, my partner. And, as I'm sure you've overlooked, being the Leader of Home – which is a whole universe – she outranks a mere monarch of a country on earth. And actually, there was a fourth mistake you all made. You did not rise when she entered the room. And by that and your other mistakes you showed that you neither respect rank, nor are you gentlemen. You will now leave my office and never return. Further, I think you should seriously consider taking up permanent residence in some other country as far from Britain as you can manage. I will give you some time to find such a place before I rescind your citizenship. You are excused.” And with that, four armed members of the Regiment escorted the now chastised and humiliated men out of the office.

The King turned to his consort and raised an eyebrow. “Hey, don't look at me!” Muriel said. “You once told me that Ted feared my smile, but that you feared my quiet voice. I think you now know why I use it.”

“Yea,” Taylor said. “It's because you're using all your energy to contain your rage, and keep from killing somebody.” And he shivered.

“You did fine, Taylor,” Muriel said, soothingly. “You laid it out for them, step by step and point by point. Oh, here's the record. Send that to the media and within twenty-four hours they will feel totally ostracized. Their credit may even be canceled. I believe they were running for Parliament.”

“I know they were. I just need their names,” Taylor said.

“Why? The media will know who they are. And I made sure I got a good view of all their faces. Just send it off. Keep a copy for yourself,” she said, handing him a second disk. “Then, if the media IS clueless, you can ask Saul to hunt up who they are.”

“Very well. Janice? Would you . . . ,” he started.

“Right away, sir. I'll just make copies and spread the joy around,” she said, smiling. “And you don't have to ask Saul. I know their names, and will send the list of them along with the disks.”

Taylor sat back and laughed. “Muriel, you've created a monster! She's ahead of me.” Janice, for her part, simply looked demure, and went back to her desk. And moments later, the stack of disk she had created reduced itself by being translated to media offices.

“By the way, you DO know who's running against them for the positions, don't you?” asked Muriel.

“No. Why?” replied Taylor.

“Well, here's an example of the Law of Unintended Consequences. All of their

opponents are trained. Their stripes show up on television to those that are also trained. But not to those without the training,” Muriel said. And Taylor laughed because he got it. The men that had just left never stood a chance of being elected to Parliament. The trained would outvote the untrained simply because they COULD trust the trained candidates to be honest.

“Oh, my!” he cried. “You never considered such a situation when you set them up!”

“Nope. Never occurred to me. Or to any of my friends or Ted. Or any of the Envoys, to my knowledge. Pure serendipity,” she replied. “But definitely works in your favor.”

“But, YOU’VE been on the telly many times. And your stripes have always shown up,” he finally said.

“Yes, but I’d always turned them on so that everyone could see them. And I never really paid any attention when others were on the television,” Muriel replied. “And no, we’re not going to have a fight over words. If you use one I don’t understand, I’ll ask. I’d expect you to do the same. But I know there’s going to be words for things that we use differently. Television or TV, and telly are just the beginning of them. As long as we understand each other, it really doesn’t matter what the words are.”

“OK, I can live with that,” Taylor said. “Besides, you’ve never brought that up before, but we’ve pretty much done that over nine years.”

“I know. But we’ve also never really used different words at each other like that, before,” Muriel said. “So, when I realized what we were doing, I figured it would be a good time to clear the air on it. I know what ‘telly’ means. But I’m more used to using ‘television’ or TV, just as you’re more used to using ‘telly’. Spellings will be another area. If I’m doing something specifically for someone that uses British spellings, I may ask your help. I doubt that the reverse would be true, simply because you’re less likely to need to do something for someone used to the American spellings. But the possibility is there. And such things just aren’t worth fighting over.”

“Well, there I can agree with you. And you’re saying you’re not out to change me or anybody over such things,” he said, seriously.

“Yep. Americans have a saying – don’t sweat the petty stuff,” Muriel grinned. “It’s just too small to be something to complain about. So . . . what have you got going, today?”

“Diplomats. Various countries want to know who and what I am, and my stand on things, and such idiotic stuff. Care to join in?” he asked.

“Hmm. I WAS going to see if Alice got the legal office set up, and go down to your Enclave and check in with the office of Triple E, there, then try to figure out what else we need. DOCTORS! That’s another thing,” she said. “But that can wait, if you think I might be useful to you. It certainly wouldn’t hurt me to feel out the positions of other countries. So, who’s up first?”

"Italy, I think. And, since Janice is picking up the phone, I'd almost expect that the Ambassador is here, now," Taylor said. "How about casual clothes? The Ambassador might pick up on the uniform, otherwise."

"Hmm. Good idea. Where would you like me?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, take your regular seat, beside me," he replied.

"Taylor," Janice said, "Your first appointment is here – the Ambassador from Italy."

"Oh, very good. Have him come in, please, Janice," Taylor replied.

"So, she actually DOES call you Taylor," said Muriel, chuckling.

"Yes. As long as it's private. With others in the office, it's either 'sir' or 'Your Majesty'," he replied, smiling. "Makes a nice change from all the formality. AH! Mister Ambassador! Come in. Have a seat. Can we get you something?"

"Oh, no, thank you. Is this young lady really necessary?" the man asked.

"I think so," Taylor said, warmly but firmly. "So what can I do for you?"

"Well, there were a couple of things. Trade, for one," he replied

"Ah, well, in general I'm in favor of trade. But of course a lot would depend on the whats and hows of it. Better left for Parliament to be in session, and all the legal formalities taken care of," Taylor said. "You know how that is. So what else was on your mind?"

"Well . . . we were a bit concerned by events that took place in that American compound, yesterday," the Ambassador said.

"Oh, really?" Taylor replied, neutrally. "I wasn't aware of anything that would concern anyone."

"Oh, yes. Some sort of ceremony that has our people a bit upset," he said. "Something about two couples being joined as as if they were married. No formalities, no discussion of their respective rights and privileges, no legal binding, no ceremony really, at all."

"Now, when you say 'no ceremony', I think what you really mean is no religious ceremony. Isn't that right?" Taylor asked.

"Well, yes, of course. I mean, how can two people be married without the proper sanctions?" the Ambassador asked.

"Hmm. Interesting question. I suppose the answer," Taylor said, "would be who decides on what is proper. You ARE speaking of the Embassy of Home in America, aren't

you?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Barbaric people. They have no regard for established procedures or proper behavior. Such actions as that lead to the end of society as we know it. No stability, no responsibility for children, loose morals . . . it's appalling!"

"So, I take it that you believe that, without some government official or clergy threatening people, that they wouldn't feel responsible for their actions?" asked Taylor.

"Well, of course! It's obvious. People are sheep that need to be driven in the right direction," the Ambassador said.

"It sounds to me more like you think people are sheep that need to be fleeced," Taylor said. "I'm afraid I can't accept that position. People, particularly people trained in Envoy techniques, are quite capable of seeing where their responsibilities lie and dealing with them."

"How can you say that! People are inherently stupid," the Ambassador said. "They MUST be forced to behave in a proper and appropriate manner. This outlandish, half baked philosophy that these people of Home are spouting must be put down, and those people forced to accept reality."

"Muriel?" Taylor said, tiredly.

"Mister Ambassador, just a moment ago you said that 'people are inherently stupid'. YOU are one of the 'people', therefore you are saying that YOU are stupid," Muriel said. "Now, I don't believe that you were really trying to say that, but nonetheless, that IS what you said. Personally, what I've found is that when individuals discover that there is a good reason for behaving in a responsible manner, they do. It's called 'enlightened self interest', and those with the training in Envoy techniques understand that enlightened self interest, because they know that they will go through the judgment of their lives and have to face all the times that they've caused harm to others in anything other than self-defense. As a result of that, and their ability to use many of the techniques to provide for themselves and their families, they have achieved more stability than all the laws of all the nations on earth have managed. Thus, they have no need of the conventions – the force – that you would apply to them. They do not need to be driven, they need to be led. Some of that leadership comes from within themselves. And some of it comes from those that have had the training in such techniques for a longer period of time. And all of it goes to promote the welfare of the people, and not just the major corporations and politicians."

"Who are you," the Ambassador said, grimly.

"My name is Muriel White. I was the first living human trained in Envoy techniques, the Ambassador from Home to America, first, and finally to the whole of earth. I'm also the Leader of the People of Home. Not by vote, as is done in America or Britain, but by the simple fact that the People of Home were following me. Oh, and I happen to be the consort of His Majesty, Taylor, King of Britain. And being a consort IS a responsibility, and not to be taken lightly. It is a partnership with another person on a personal level, accepting

responsibility for one's own actions and caring about the other person's needs in something beyond mere friendship."

"You! . . . you . . . ," the Ambassador growled. "Your Majesty, I must object to this person being here!"

"You can object all you want. You've attempted to make allegations and innuendos regarding people with Envoy training . . . as I fully expected that you would," Taylor said. "It's only fair that your attempts be turned back on you by the very person that you have sought to malign. Now, I think this meeting is at an end. And I suggest that, if what you have said is actually the position of your government, you may need to watch your back. I know for fact that the majority of the people of your country are trained. They may just decide that they don't need to be driven any longer. You are excused, sir. And I expect, before you return, that you and your government extend an apology to the Leader of Home for your insinuations. Good day." And two members of the Regiment arrived and escorted the Ambassador out.

"Hmm. Good news like you is likely to get around. I'd be almost willing to bet that the other Ambassadors will be warned of your position before he even reaches his Embassy," Muriel said. "And that your other appointments are suddenly canceled."

"We can only hope," Taylor said, grinning. "And thank you for picking up after me."

"Hey, what are friends for?" Muriel said. "Besides, he'd given me the ammunition, himself, to shoot him down. Calling the people stupid. I doubt that you will see him again. I think his government will recall him after that."

"Yes, especially if we 'leak' it to the media," Taylor said, laughing.

Chapter 28

The Offices (Tuesday afternoon)

Muriel was sitting in her office, after lunch, trying to see where Alice Wilson was. She wanted to see the new law office. And that's just when Alice translated in.

"Afternoon, Muriel. Were you looking for me?" Alice asked.

"Yep. I was wondering if I could see the new office," Muriel replied.

"Of course. I'll take you. Then you'll be able to find it whenever you want," Alice said, translating them both out. "I grabbed Susan and Beth, temporarily, to set it up. I wanted to get it started the right way. Once they've trained the new office manager and receptionist, they'll go back."

Muriel looked around, and was surprised. The reception area was smaller, and there were no walls and doors between it and the main floor. There WERE two areas to the main floor, though. One side held four lawyers, and the other only two.

"Solicitors and barristers," Alice said. "My office is in the back. Right now, I've got the solicitors working on possible scenarios. What if's to try to stay ahead of you. The results are passed to the barristers to look over, and come up with plans for defending or prosecuting, as the case may be. Pretty much what a law student does, but geared toward the sorts of things you've had to deal with. Oh, by the way, they're all trained."

"No secretaries?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. With the new tablets and computers they really don't need them," Alice said. "We may add some, later, but for right now, they're better off learning how to do it themselves. And to tell you the truth, I'd be just as happy if they only ever played with scenarios."

"Yea. Me too. But we'll see what happens. So, what does the office manager do?" asked Muriel.

"Mostly, sort mail and get it to the right person. Manage workloads, so no one lawyer is doing all of it. Field phone calls when I'm out, and make sure that the office is clean and supplied," Alice said. "I know, kind of a put down after running the one in the American Enclave. But we really don't need more unless we end up hiring secretaries. I'd prefer paralegals, but we'll see what happens and how stiff the workload is."

"OK, I've got a question for you. What happens if we need legal service for a trained person outside of my office. Can you handle it?" asked Muriel.

"Yes. One of the first scenarios I asked them to look into," Alice replied. "As long as

we're not taking money from a client, the zoning allows it. And anything that pertains to fully trained individuals pertains to the office of the Leader of Home, since they're Citizens of Home."

"Cool! That takes a load off my mind. Hi, Beth. Working out all right for you?" Muriel asked.

"Yep. This will be easy to train someone in. Oh, I'll give him or her the complete load, but I don't expect that they'll have to use any of it," Beth said.

"Hi Susan," Muriel said, turning to the receptionist.

"Before you ask, yes, I'll warn the regular receptionist that you're apt to pop in unexpectedly," Susan said, and they both laughed.

"Well, I don't expect that it will be as often as I used to plague you," Muriel said. I'm more of an overseer, now."

"You wish. I've already met one of your first trainees since you moved over here," Susan said. "In fact, he may end up office manager, just to give him some work experience, and his mother is talking about becoming the receptionist," Susan said.

"Oh, now THAT'S interesting. How'd they find out about the jobs?" asked Muriel

"Ads," Susan said. "We put some fliers up in places where the poorer people are, and they were in here the next day."

"Hmm. That may be something we need to think about. Providing work for people. I'll have to think about that," Muriel said. "Thanks, Susan."

"You're welcome, Ambassador," Susan said, and Muriel stuck her tongue out at her. Susan just laughed.

"Well, I've got to get out of here and do some honest work," Muriel said. "I want to see how the Triple E branch, here, is doing." She waived at everyone, and translated out.

"Now that's something that was missing. Seeing people just pop in and out," Alice said, and the other two nodded.

"Cultural thing?" asked Beth.

"Maybe. Or maybe that people here just aren't in as much of a hurry as Muriel is. She was always rather pushed for time," Susan said.

"Might be interesting to find out," Alice said.

Muriel's entrance to the British Enclave once again engendered a great deal of interest

by children, as usual. They thronged around her and her Fighting Class A uniform that was most comfortable to her. Shouts of 'It's her' and 'She's here' rang out throughout the compound. Regimentals turned and looked, and waived as she proceeded up the main street, and she waived back. But it was the touch of children just wanting to be able to say that they actually touched her that tickled her the most. Ted was right. These were the Children of Home, and the hope for the future. So she touched back – patting a head, here, a back, there. Sometimes hold a small hand for a moment. And all the time extending her mind out to all of them with love.

They dropped off as she entered the administrative building. A quick pass at the commander's office, a waive and explanation that she was just visiting Triple E. And then she was entering the office she'd never seen.

“Good morning,” her voice rang out. “My name is Muriel”

“We know, Madam Ambassador,” the very nervous receptionist said. “I'll get the office manager.”

“Well, first, I'm just Muriel. Yes, I've got titles, but I only use them when people have so crossed the line that it's about the last thing they hear. Mostly, I'm just Muriel. That way I don't look like a threat to people,” Muriel said. “What's your name?”

“Nathan, miss.”

“Well, Nathan, I'd really like you to just call me Muriel. Like you, I'm just someone doing a job,” Muriel said. “And it makes it easier if people are relaxed enough around me to be able to make suggestions and come up with ideas. Very often, those suggestions and ideas help me do my job. It also helps me to know what problems you have, and where I can provide help.”

“M-M-Muriel,” he stammered.

“Yep. That's the name. So, what problems do you see?” asked Muriel.

“Nothing I can think of,” he said. “I'm just the receptionist.”

“You do any typing? Set up appointments for people or search the Internet for information?” asked Muriel.

“Well, yea, all of that,” he said.

“OK, do you have the new computers and phones?” asked Muriel.

“Well, yes, I guess so,” he replied.

“What about education. The University of Home has an administrative assistant course that is available to trained people at no charge,” Muriel said.

"What? I'd never heard of that," he said.

::Ernie, could you come to the Triple E office, please?: Muriel sent.

"Hi, Muriel, what's up?" asked Colonel Jackie's Security Chief.

"Education for this poor young man," Muriel said. "Or, should I get Betty in here?"

"I can do it," Ernie said. "Administrative assistant? How about the basic accounting course, too. I think Nathan gets some overflow, sometimes. OK, Nathan, this won't hurt, and will only take a couple of minutes." And proceeded to dump the courses on Nathan.

While that was going on, Muriel contacted Jeff. ::Jeff, do you know if the Triple E office in Britain got new computers and phones?:

::Hmm. Yea, they did. OH! They didn't get the training to use them. Want me to come?: he sent back.

::Is it packaged up so I can dump it on people?: Muriel asked.

::Um . . . Yea. Betty packaged it. Just a second.: And Muriel could feel him draw away for a bit. ::OK, here it is. I had to pull it off my computer. Sorry.: he sent, and gave her the course.

::Thanks, chief,: Muriel sent. ::I appreciate it.:

::No problem. Sorry we messed up. Want me to send one of my team?:

::Naw, I think I can handle this,: she sent back. ::If not, I'll holler.:

By this time, Ernie was done with Nathan, and Muriel took over. "Now, I've got how to use the phones and computers efficiently. So, just go blank and pass it to your soul. I think it'll help take the stress of the job out of you," she said, and sent him the package.

"That's how you Wait a minute! You can do THAT with them?" and other such comments went on for a couple of minutes, and had both Ernie and Muriel laughing.

"Yea, all that. Jeff's pretty good at coming up with things that are helpful," Muriel said. "So, now I need to meet your office manager, and Ernie and her squad and I will see about getting the rest trained." And they did. With that set up, Muriel felt more comfortable about the miniature Triple E office and said good-bye.

As she exited the office, a man said, "Excuse me, miss, would you happen to know if Ambassador Muriel is intending to have her legal office take over all the legal affairs for Home in Britain?" Muriel turned and smiled – and pulled out her Home passport. "Oops"

“And I'm just Muriel. The legal team I've got started is just for my office. I seem to get in enough trouble that it takes a whole office just for me,” she kidded.

“Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize. I thought you were one of her squad members. But it's been nagging at us that maybe we'd be out of work,” he said. “Oh, I should have introduced myself. I'm Arty. I don't use my full first name – Aramis. My parents were, unfortunately, enamored with Alexandre Dumas. Three Musketeers, you know.”

“Well, Arty, there's no reason to be sorry. The difference is the uniform.” ::Mata, got a second? Or could you ask someone to come here?: “The Envoy uniform is a bit different, and plainer,” she said. “Like this,” she added pointing with her thumb to the left. A cough to her right had her looking both ways. “CHUCK! I'm SURE I placed you on my left. So, what's up Chuck?” she said, slurring the last two words together.

“My lady calls and I come,” he grinned at her. “Mata was busy. Something about a cracking attempt on the computers. She's getting the information off hers, now. And watch those last two words or you'll be eating peas porridge for a week.”

“Add ham. I LIKE split pea soup,” she quipped back. “Now, Arty, that's what the Envoys in my squads normally wear. Why don't we go to your offices, and I'll assure everyone that their jobs are safe.”

“OK Muriel,” he said, laughing. Then turned to Chuck. “What's the problem with the last two words that she had said?”

“Oh, I'm her cook. I also was her plumber for her first office. So, when she's feeling a bit facetious, she threatens to call me Upchuck. And sometimes she puts the two words, 'up' and 'Chuck', together, and I threaten to quit or serve her something she doesn't like, or something. Just banter.”

And that's why the law office of the British Enclave was disturbed by their head lawyer laughing like a fool as he entered the door. “Hi, folks,” Muriel rang out. “I'm Muriel. Arty asked me a very reasonable question, and I've got a very reasonable answer. You are NOT being supplanted by the law office in London. I'm outrageous enough to need a whole office of lawyers just to try to keep me out of trouble. That make you feel more comfortable?”

“Wait! I don't understand,” one woman said.

“It's simple. You have a job, here, to deal with the legal issues of this Enclave, it's branch of Envoy Enclave Enterprises, and the Ambassador to Britain. The law office in London is simply to handle issues arising around me,” Muriel said. “There may be some overlap on occasion – and that's not a projection, just a possibility. IF there are overlaps, then the lead office would be the one who's principal was most affected. Otherwise, well . . . you know your business and your principals. You don't need an outside office looking over your shoulder or doing your job.”

“So, basically, you're saying that you cause enough trouble that you need your own

office,” the woman said. And the rest of the lawyers gasped at the temerity of the comment.

“Yep. That's about right,” Muriel said, tossing it off. “I DO cause trouble. Basically, I'm a target. I'm the focus that most people see, so when there's a conflict with the apparent views of society it's often me that is attacked. So, when I came over here my lawyer followed me.”

“But British law isn't American law. What could he do here?” the woman asked.

“She. My lawyer is a woman. She got the courses for British law, and passed the bar, here. She's also licensed both as a solicitor and a barrister. But, mainly,” Muriel said, “she oversees the office from the standpoint of what she knows about me and how to counter various attacks. The office actually contains solicitors and barristers that would actually compile the cases. That make it clear?” And the relief in the room was palpable.

“Yea. Your lawyer sounds like quite a person,” the woman said. “I'd like to meet her.”

“I don't see any problem. Her name is Alice Wilson,” Muriel said, sending her image to the woman. “Just realize that you might have to coordinate a time and place. But so far things are quiet and you could probably set it up.”

“Or she could just look over your shoulder,” Alice said from behind Muriel. “Sorry, I heard you mention my name, and thought I'd better find out what's going on. Hi, all. Well, you just saved me trying to find a way of breaking it to you. I may use you people as a resource, sometimes, so I can better understand some of the esoteric parts of British law, cultural differences, and the workings of this Enclave and Triple E office and how it might impact on Muriel. She wasn't kidding about being a target. In the time I've been her lawyer she's been involved in more attempts to close down the American Enclave, as well as attacks on her life and attempts to deport her. Nobody yet has managed to figure out where she should be deported to, since her birth certificate lists Phoenix, Arizona. And all of the lawsuits ended up thrown out on the grounds of being against the Treaty that she and Home have with the various countries. But people keep trying.”

“Well, we'd be glad to fill you in on what's happened here,” the woman said, and Muriel was beginning to understand who actually ran this office. “Let me put something together over the next few days, and I'll send it to you. That will at least give you enough information to ask questions.”

“Thanks,” Alice said. “I appreciate that.” And she grinned, waived, and translated out. And, after a few more pleasantries, Muriel did, too.

Chapter 29

Troubles Come in Threes

(Wednesday morning)

“OK,” Alice said, sitting in Muriel's casual area, sipping coffee, “here's what the damage is. First, someone has challenged your consort-ship with Taylor in court as not being a legal joining.”

“Hmm. Well, it's normal that marriages from foreign countries are recognized as being valid,” Muriel said. “That was one of the things that I looked up, both when I was investigating for myself and when I double checked for my friends. Hammer it from the standpoint that it's a voluntary partnership that takes the place of marriage in other countries. If you like, I can get you a certificate, like what I gave my friends, to show that it's accepted by Home.”

“Sounds good. The second one was those men that attempted to rob the restaurant. They're claiming unlawful restraint,” Alice said.

“OK, there you got me. Unless it can be shown – and you have my record. Mata's too, I believe – that they were there to rob the place and could have harmed civilians. And that I acted as a concerned citizen to protect those civilians,” Muriel said.

“We can try that. But what I'm wondering is if Taylor could appoint you as an officer-of-the-law-in-fact, or some such. I've got the office looking into it from a couple of angles. One, is a direct appointment. The second is that, as you are the leader of Home, you are in fact the Commander in Chief of the Regiment of Home. And they DO have arrest authority. Taylor pushed that through a year after the Regiment was formed, because he saw the potential of using them as an alternative police force in times of disaster.”

“Good question. The best I can do is ask him,” Muriel said.

“Ask me what?” asked Taylor, translating in.

“Arrest authority,” Alice said, and outlined what she'd just told Muriel.

“Definitely, as Commander in Chief of the Regiment. Same authority my grandmother had for the British side of it,” he said. “It's seldom used, but it was there. However, you're much more active and mobile than my grandmother was. And I think I can appoint you as a Special Investigator with arrest authority, and back-date it to just before you moved over here. And yes, I'll sign a consort certificate. But who would you get to attest to it? It would look suspicious if you signed in two places.”

“Can I interrupt,” asked Mata.

“Mata, you know better. Your input is ALWAYS welcome. Of course you can speak up,” Muriel said.

“OK, we’ve always said that you were named Leader by the Envoys, themselves. You never pressed the issue as to how that took place,” Mata began.

“I always thought that it was done in mesh mind, somehow,” Muriel said.

“It was. But at the same time, we decided that it might be a good idea, if pressed, to have a spokesperson – a single point that humans could go to if they questioned your Leadership,” Mata said. “This was actually enacted back when Ted was named Leader. We just never needed to bring it up. Envoy records are recognized in courts, across the world, as being valid. This would kinda test the next level. Have the spokesperson attest to your consort-ship.”

“GREAT! Yea, that should do it. Can we get him or her here to sign it?” asked Muriel.

“Um . . . ,” began Mata.

“Oh, NO! This is too much!,” Muriel busted up laughing.

“IT’S NOT MY FAULT!” Mata exclaimed. “Bart felt that people would think he was too close to Ted to be objective! So, I got volunteered.”

“But then, when I got named, was it you that did it?” asked Muriel.

“Nope. It was a consensus. I’m just the spokesperson,” Mata replied. “I had no influence in it. I didn’t even start the question. The whole thing was started by Caleb. We went into a total mesh mind, one night when you were asleep, and the agreement was reached in five minutes.”

“Wait a minute, Mata,” Muriel said. “Did you have any idea, when you first volunteered to be my trainer, that I’d end up as Leader?”

“Actually, that’s a maybe. I knew you had potential, but I didn’t really know how much, or how much impact you’d have on both earth and Home,” Mata said. “You surprised everyone, right off the bat. And you kept surprising us. Still do, for that matter. And Taylor and Anna are running close seconds. As for the rest that you’ve trained, it’s a toss up as to who is in third place. You’ve had a major effect on people that you’ve trained. Anyway, that’s beside the point. I can attest to your status as consorts, and add something to the parchment that would indicate my Envoy name as an identifier.” And that’s how Mata ended up signing Muriel and Taylors certificate of consort-ship, as Matthew and with her real name as a mental bug next to her name, much to the amusement of Muriel and Taylor.

“So, what’s the third problem?” asked Muriel.

“You’re not going to like this,” Alice said. “There’s a movement that has actually entered a lawsuit to have your office removed from the Palace and it’s grounds.”

"WHAT movement," Taylor asked, grimly.

"Hmm," Alice said, consulting her phone. "It says here, 'Citizens for the Protection of the Royal Person and Property'. I haven't been able to locate such a group, and the lawyers for the group refuse to identify them."

"I'LL take care of this one. I have a hunch who they are," Taylor said. "I have a hunch that their stand is that, because she isn't a British citizen and legally married to me, that she has no place having an office in the Palace. Let me know when the hearing is, and keep me informed on the paperwork. I'll take lead on this one. I'm admitted to the bar."

"No offense, Taylor," Alice said, "but are you sure you want to do that? It could risk your Regency."

"No, it won't," he said. "First, the group is not going to want to attend the hearing, because they'd be found out. So, that's the first thing is to make sure that they're Summoned to the hearing by the court."

"I can do that," Alice said. "Next?"

"Next will be handled at the hearing. I'll give you my credentials to submit as Lead," he said. "They do NOT list me as King. They list me under a ducal title, which is perfectly legal when royalty at this level take on tasks. And it's doubtful if the group knows all the titles I've acquired over the years. In addition, I'll make sure you have a copy of the Royal Warrants naming Muriel as a Duchess and citizen of Britain. I'll also include a copy of this Certificate we just signed. Third, as King, I have certain rights as to the use of property. And the Palace is part of that."

"So, you think it would be a slam-dunk," Alice stated.

"Oh, much worse than that," Taylor said. "The first thing I'd do is ask for a meeting WITH the principals. ALL of them. And before the hearing. Judges prefer opponents to try to work things out before they go to court. What I'd have to say to them, as King, should cause them to withdraw the motion under MY terms. Basically, they'd be given the opportunity to withdraw, or leave the country within twenty-four hours, forfeiting their citizenship. You see, I think it's one element of the 'committee' that thinks they 'elected' me King. Oh, that's the fourth thing you'll need is the abdication papers that my grandmother signed. Anyway, this element refused to take the trip to Home. They're unbalanced."

"OUCH! OK, I'm outclassed, here," Alice said. "You've got Lead."

"By the way Taylor, I think I can back you up with that," Muriel said. "There is a way to block the use of Envoy techniques. I won't go into specifics, but basically I can back them up to just the draw on power, connection to their soul, and personal shields. So, clothing and passive defense shield only. Not active defense, no flying, no translating. In other words, about the level of a ten year old."

"Oh, now that's just plain wicked," Alice said.

"Actually, no," Muriel said. "With the rest active, they could potentially harm someone that's untrained. Oh, I'd give them a choice. They could always take the trip to Home and learn what the balance is really about. But that's the option if they don't want to become full Citizens of Home. You can't have it both ways. These techniques were meant to help people, not harm people."

"Oh, hey," Taylor said. "That 'Special Investigator' license. Muriel, what this is is a blanket statement that you have permission to investigate whatever you feel is necessary, using Envoy techniques and the rules of Home."

"Oh, SHIT! You just trumped anything that any other country has. It's already in the Treaty that the Enclave can do such investigation," Muriel said, "under contract. You're doing away with the need for a contract. Why?"

"Because, in this country, you wouldn't have the immediate response that you have in other countries," Taylor said. "I do suggest that you get with Scotland Yard and learn their procedures. Maybe some others, too. The Metropolitan Police are pretty much local, but I think one of the best. And their procedures are about standard throughout Britain. OH! That's detective level, not the beat patrolmen. We have trained people on the force, and I think just contacting one of them would be enough to get you their assistance. Looks like your wall is going to have to grow some."

"Hmm. Yes. And Marcia will be out after my scalp," Muriel said, grinning. "She may have gotten SAS, but I get the Yard."

"Don't count on it, young lady!" The voice caused Muriel to look toward the door. "I brought the mountain to you. Commissioner of Police Mister Trevor Smythe, may I introduce the woman that started it all, Muriel, Ambassador to earth and THE Leader of Home."

"Charmed, m'dear. So, you're the young lady that landed our Taylor," he said, rather familiarly.

"Well, I'm not sure I know who landed whom. But yes, we're consorts," Muriel replied.

"Well, I caught your little act in the restaurant. I must say, very well done," he replied. "And, since Marcia was in my office, I thought I'd talk to her about offering you a more stable position than just that accorded to the citizens of this country. Oh, and I've written up the fact that you acted to prevent a crime, and potentially save lives and property with your quick action. I understand that there's an action against you in court. That should solve that one."

Muriel took a quick look at Mata. Her Security Chief was doing a studied and thorough ceiling inspection. And Muriel just laughed. "Uh, huh. Telling tales out of school, now, Mata."

"Well, SOMEBODY has to," Mata replied.

"Commissioner Smythe, my Security Chief, Mata. She and my squads are all Envoys," Muriel said.

"Oh, I don't see that as a barrier. Since they're acting under your guidance, they could be said to be drafted into action by you. Saves everybody a bit of a bother, you know," he replied. "Oh! I meant to give you the procedures we use. These include the differences for Scotland and Northern Ireland, and hopefully in a way that won't be confusing. So, if you'd just let me make a connection to you, it'll be done." She did, and it was finished in very short order.

As she sorted through the information, the Commissioner walked over toward her wall, being specifically careful to not be behind her desk. "My word!" he said, "I don't ever think I've seen such an accumulation of degrees. Amazing. Well, here's one more for you. I'm afraid it's not PhD level. Our academy only hands out certificates. But this and the badge should suffice for any questions. Oh, and His Majesty can extend the area of operation to account for any of your travels in the realm. That idea of his for a 'Special Investigator' should do the trick, nicely, so I imagine you'd use whatever badge he designs for such action. May I ask?"

"Go ahead," Muriel said.

"This young lady, Marcia, and her troops. Would you say they're responsible and truthful?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. With everyone but me. But then, we grew up together and attended the same school before I was trained," Muriel said.

"Well, she was telling me what I thought were tall tales about you," he said. "Something about your being able to swim four laps of an Olympic sized pool at a sprint, just as a morning exercise, and being able to toss around twenty foot poles."

"Guilty as charged, sir. I'm a bit out of shape, right now. Haven't found a pool that I could use. And I have tossed the caber when I was younger. I was trying for control rather than brute strength. It's the same with the swimming, in fact. Control and flexibility are everything to get the kinds of speed that I use," Muriel said.

"How are you managing to exercise, now?" he asked. "Or have you stopped?"

"Not stopped. More advanced type of standard exercises, and done with a sixty pound pack. I may raise that, soon. It's feeling rather light to me," Muriel said, and grinned.

"You don't say. Well, I just happen to have a man on the force that's come in from Scotland. Works in the office, you know, not out on the streets. Thinks he's something big because he's won a few junior championships. You don't use Envoy techniques to toss the caber, do you," he said as a statement.

"That would defeat the whole purpose," Muriel replied. "I was interested in building myself up, and used the techniques to build muscle. But not for the actual exercises,

themselves. Considering the exercises I do, I think I'm still in shape."

"Oh, excellent. Man's not trained. But still tries to lord it over the office. Always wearing kilts, and stuff. Has some good ideas, and I'd really hate to have to send him down. But it's getting a bit extreme. Wondered if you'd be willing to help take him down a peg. Can't use Marcia. He KNOWS what kind of training she's had," the Commissioner rambled on.

"Commissioner Smythe, I'd be pleased to help you. Mata, I think sixteen year old girl, in school clothes? With her mature mother or older sister?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, Muriel, you're nasty. Yep. Sounds good," Mata laughed. "Maybe better as a man, though. I could be your father. Or brother."

"Hmm . . . yea, you could be right," Muriel said.

"I'll just get him in, then," he said, pulling out his phone.

"Tell him St. James Park. I'll get some Regiment troops to cordon off the area," Taylor said. "Tell him that these are guests of yours, and don't name them. Or just use her last name – White."

"And to think I thought I'd be stuck in the office, today," Muriel said.

Chapter 30

GAME ON!

(Wednesday afternoon)

"Carstares! Ah, good. You found us," Commissioner Smythe said. "Just escorting this young lady and her brother around. Told her about your abilities, you know. Just being conversational. She's from America, and never seen a caber toss. Thought you might like to show her how it's done."

You could see Carstares nearly lift himself off the ground, puffing himself up. "SIR! Happy to oblige, sir!" he said.

"Ah good. Well, His Majesty was kind enough to loan us some troops to clear an area. Just over this way, beyond the edge of the trees, there. Can't miss those green uniforms, now, can you. AH! And someone brought a tree!" Smythe said.

"Caber, sir. That's what it's called," Carstares said.

"Ah, yes. Of course," Smythe went on, as if nothing had happened. "Looks like a bloody big telephone pole. Can you handle that?"

"Of course, sir!" Carstares said, and walked to the far end of the caber and began raising it. One of the Regiment came over and helped steady it when it was upright. Carstares then moved around the caber to point himself down-range, bent over and grasped the caber near the end, and hoisted it in a 'lift and snatch' maneuver that left his hands under the end of it, and balancing on his shoulder. Again, the Regiment member helped steady it, so it wouldn't fall backward. Three running steps to gain momentum, and he hoisted the end in his hands. The caber went up, arced, then the opposite end hit the ground. The top end fell back to about eight thirty, if it had been a clock hand.

"Bad turf," Carstares muttered. "Would you like me to assist you in bringing it back? I'd be happy to show you how it's done."

Muriel just smiled. "I don't think that's necessary," she said. ::Keep clear,:: she sent to the Regimental troops, ::I've got this.:: And she calmly walked down-range to the caber, eying the center of mass, and picked it up, putting the center of mass on her shoulder. She slowly rotated so that the same end of the caber would act as the base for her lift as it did for Carstares, then walked back to the starting position and set it down. Like Carstares, she went to the far end and lifted it up, walking her hands down as she went until it was vertical. She steadied it for a moment then, still holding on to it, moved around so she was pointed down range.

The 'lift and snatch' to get her hands under the end worked just as she'd expected, and she stepped into the mass to control it. Then, allowing the top to move forward to start a fall, ran two steps, school-girl type kilts flying, and stopped. The top, of course, kept moving

forward. There comes a point in the fall where an experienced person can feel a change in the way it falls as the weight shifts away from her hands. And, just as that shift reached a certain point, she tossed her end in the air straight up. The caber seemed to rotate on the center of mass, with what had been the top end hitting the ground while what had been in her hands was forward of it. And over it went, hitting the ground neatly.

“What do you think, Your Majesty?” asked the Commissioner.

“I'd say a twelve. Colonel?” he asked Jackie, who'd come along with the troops.

“Definitely. I think I'll have to get her to show some of my troops how it's done,” the Colonel said.

“WHAT IS THIS? I thought you said she'd never seen a caber toss!” Carstares shouted at the Commissioner.

“I haven't. I've never watched another person perform that,” Muriel said. “I've only used it as a casual exercise to better learn control. And I had to teach myself, since I didn't want to attract any attention.”

“Impossible! It takes years of training under an experienced person!” Carstares said.

“Naw. Two weeks and I was hitting twelve. Like I said, just a casual exercise,” Muriel said. “Actually, this one seemed a bit light.” And as she was speaking, the Regimental troops came in and started patting her on the back in congratulations, grinning.

“Nobody could do that in two weeks,” Carstares said. “Not naturally. It takes a great deal of strength.”

Muriel just switched to utilities and pack, and proceeded to do one hand hand-clap push-ups from her knuckles. At twenty, she switched hands and did twenty more. And Carstares eyes got bigger. “All the muscle building was done by telling my soul to watch the muscle groups and build them up,” she said, switching now to the Fighting Class A uniform. “Of course, I probably COULD cheat. But that would defeat the purpose of the exercise. Nope, honestly doing it the way it was meant to be done is what helps teach you control.”

“Who are you,” Carstares growled.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. My name is Muriel. I'm Ambassador to earth from Home, the Leader of Home, and consort to His Majesty, Taylor.”

“You're one of those trained people. You MUST have used some of those tricks to do that!”

“I say, Carstares, that's about enough!” Smythe said. “The Ambassador has already told you that she didn't, and why. And you've seen her do push-ups that have got to be the hardest way of doing them that I've ever seen. She has no reason to lie to you, or anyone.”

I've seen her record. And I can tell when someone uses Envoy techniques to do something. I assure you that she didn't. Most amazing display I've ever seen. Could even feel her mind gaging exactly the right moment, and right amount of force to use. Knowledge, man. Knowledge of herself and what she can do. THAT'S the trick. No fancy Envoy tricks needed for something like that, if you're willing to do the work. And that's the real question, isn't it? Are you someone that wants to do? Or someone that just wants to feel like a big man."

"Smythe! That's it. I won't put up with this harassment any longer. You've been on my case since I got here," Carstares said. "I've never tried to build myself up. I've always told it like it is. But this! This upstart woman using her tricks to make me look bad . . . well, I just won't stand for it."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Carstares," the Commissioner said, sadly. "I've tried, repeatedly, I'll admit, to get you to understand that your attitude was irritating others in the office. Now, I've shown you that people can do things without having to brag about them, on, and on, and on. They just get in and do what needs to be done. You've resisted listening to me, and now you refuse to use your eyes to see that a young woman is able to do things that you only dream about."

"Mister Carstares," Muriel said. "I've met people like you before. You have capabilities that you haven't tried to develop, so you blame somebody else for your own failures. You CAN overcome that. But it means work. Work on your attitude, and work on your goals. We can help. But we can't force you to accept that help. You have to want to, and you have to ask. You have to make your own decisions as to what you want to do. If you decide you want to learn, come talk to me. The guards will know where to find me, or will contact me if I'm busy, and my office will make you comfortable until I can get there."

"Commissioner Smythe, I was very happy to meet you, and I hope we can meet again. You're always welcome in my office," she said. "And thank you for the information on your procedures. THAT was an eye-opener. And I'll keep them in mind if I run into any similar situations. And now, I think I should be getting back." And she translated out.

Taylor followed, moments later, as did Marcia. "I've got the troops cleaning up, taking care of the caber and checking the ground, then they'll be headed back to their barracks," Taylor said. "You seem down."

"Oh, a little. It's so sad to see someone waste themselves like that," Muriel said. "Smythe is going to fire him, you know. One more out-of-work bum with no prospects, because his attitude gets in the way of being hired by anyone. I admire the Commissioner, though. He's tried. Mata told me that the man has been there a year, supposedly finding out how the Metropolitan police work before being moved into the field with a handler. A year. And from what Mata says, it usually doesn't take more than a month."

"You really don't use Envoy techniques when you do that," Taylor said as a flat statement, and with admiration.

"Nope. It would only be cheating myself," Muriel said.

"Nine years ago – were you just being outrageous when you walked into the room in the air?" he asked.

"Nope. The room was crowded, and I was small. I'd never have made it to the President," Muriel said. "Even with Ted running interference for me. So, I decided that the only way to do it was to be outrageous. And, if you're going to do something like that, it's best to set it up as REALLY outrageous. And the man at the door that heralded our entrances enjoyed the humor of it, too."

"So, THAT'S why you did it. Practicality made outrageous for practical purposes!" Taylor said. "And on the spur of the moment. Outstanding. You sure got MY attention. And I'm glad you did. I'd hate to think of what would have happened to me if you hadn't realized I was in trouble. You've kept doing it, too, haven't you?"

"What? Looked out for you? Tried to get you to grow up? Yea," she admitted. "At first, it was just to help you do your job. That changed, four years later. Taylor . . .," she paused.

"You're going to say something about changing me," he said. "Well, I'm glad you did!"

"Actually, I didn't want to change you. I wanted you to change yourself. So I set up situations where you had to grow, to reach your own potential," Muriel said. "You chose your own path. And I was on pins and needles the whole time, wondering if I'd still like the person you became. The start was five years ago. But, and I think you know this, it didn't end until just recently. When I told you you'd graduated I meant it. What you go through is of your own making."

"Am I allowed to know what changed?" he asked.

"Me. I had a long talk with my mother. She set me straight on a lot of things that had me worried, and I decided to grow up, myself," Muriel said into his chest, then looked up and smiled. And Taylor kissed her, softly, gently, and without the 'clutch' attitude of people in the throws of hormonal excesses.

"Keep it decent, people," Marcia said. "Company coming. Looks like they're looking for you, Taylor. They're headed for the main doors."

"Hmm. Yes. Muriel, get Alice. And hold her here until I call you, please. It's that UN-committee that wants to expel you from your office," Taylor said. "I think we can solve this problem right here."

"Do they have their lawyer with them?" asked Muriel.

"Uh . . . no," Taylor said. "Alice should know who he is. Get him here. I'll let Janice seat them, and wait for the lawyer to arrive before I make my entrance."

"Alice?" Muriel said and sent.

"On it. And he's on his way. And fuming," Alice said, translating in. "I told him that the committee had arrived to talk to Taylor."

"OK, Janice has got them seated, and they've refused tea," Taylor said.

"OK, where are they?" a man asked, coming in the door. "Oh, sorry, I'm Marshal Hollingberry. Oh, GAD, and I just stuck my foot in it. Please pardon me, Your Majesty. And you, Ambassador. I'm the solicitor for the group that's trying to oust you from your office, ma'am. And they were just informed of your documentation and what you were trying to push for. I must say, that's adventuresome. Alice, you're leading this?"

"Nope. I'm simply support. Muriel has someone more powerful to handle this," Alice said. "Him," she added, pointing to Taylor. And Hollingberry's jaw dropped.

"Alice has been good enough to act as solicitor for me. I'm admitted to the bar," Taylor said.

"I should have known. I didn't recognize the title, and should have researched it," Hollingberry said. "I'm certainly not starting off well. So, where are the miscreants?"

"In my office, refusing tea, and acting grumpy, according to my secretary," Taylor said, grinning. "So, how do you want to do this?"

"We go in together," Hollingberry said. "All four of us. That they went to YOUR office indicates that they want to put pressure on you. I think it's time they began to realize that they're in deep trouble. I happen to know that the Judge of the case doesn't like frivolous lawsuits. I'm half-tempted to withdraw, simply because they really have no case."

"Well, stick around for a bit. We'll see what fun we can have with them," Taylor said. "Alice didn't realize that I had some ammunition available to deal with people like them." And they all translated to the hall outside Taylor's office, then walked in.

"What is this! SHE shouldn't be here," one of the men said.

"I don't see why not, since it's obvious that she is who you want to talk about," Taylor said. "And I see that you have as little respect for me as you do for her. Well, that's all right. I think we can cover the contingencies. Alice?"

"Sir!" she replied, then turned to the men. "I'm sure your lawyer already told you this, but Her Grace, Muriel, is a citizen of Britain, and a Duchess. So, one of your complaints against her is null and void just on that. In addition, the disposition of property owned by or under the control of the crown is up to the monarch – in this case His Majesty. So that's another point off your list. Now, as to Taylor and Muriel not being married, there you're completely wrong. In Home, the matter of two people joining together is done as a partnership, and they're called consorts. It's done by agreement between the people, and – in

Home – requires no certification. Here, on earth, it does, and a form was devised to take care of that. This form attests that Muriel and Taylor are consorts,” she said, holding up the form, “and that they understand their responsibilities and there is no reason why they shouldn't be consorts. Under British law, this serves the same capacity as a marriage license from a foreign country.”

“Now for the kicker,” Muriel said. “I know, I probably shouldn't be talking directly to you. But, you see, I actually have a second lawyer, and he's taken the lead in this matter and will be pleading it before the Judge. He'll be the barrister of the case. And he has a few words of warning for you. Taylor.”

“Gentlemen, I will give you a choice. You can withdraw this motion. Now. Today. Such a withdrawal would reach the Judge this afternoon. Or, you can find some other country to live in and your citizenship will be revoked. We really don't need your kind of trash, here. But I'm willing to allow you to stay IF this motion is rescinded and you at least try to learn how to behave properly. As it is, your motion is doomed from the start. All you're doing is attempting to agitate the situation, and this country doesn't need that.”

“You can't DO that! We have rights,” one of them said.

“Yes. You also have wrongs. And in this case,” Hollingberry said, “the wrongs outweigh the rights. You've seen the documentation. One other piece that I just received is the writ of abdication by the former Queen. She abdicated in favor of then-Prince Taylor. You did NOT elect him. The rest of the people decided to accept him, but were in no way pressured into it.”

“Gentlemen, you have another decision to make, too. You are only partially trained. You refused to take the trip to Home and back, and become full Citizens of Home,” Muriel said. “As the Leader of Home, it's my responsibility to be sure that those trained are aware of their responsibilities. And, where individuals operate to the detriment of others, to see to it that their training will NOT be used to harm others. Since you did not take the trip to Home, you have not faced your Judgment and learned about the balance. So, I would have to restrict your abilities in such a way that you couldn't harm others by using the training. And yes, I can do that. You would still have the connection to your soul, and the power that goes along with it. But you would no longer be able to translate, and your use of shields would be restricted to clothing and passive defensive personal shield. This gives you the opportunity to later take the trip to Home and become full Citizens, and have all your abilities restored.”

“There you have it, gentlemen,” Hollingberry said. “Both the King and the Leader of Home are being generous, believe it or not. The King could have had you ruined with a counter suit. The Leader of Home could have had you, likewise, ruined. Or killed. I've seen her record ever since I was a child. She may appear weak and not a threat. But believe me, she is capable of a great deal, all alone and by herself. Personally, I suggest that you accept the King's offer, and withdraw the motion, now, while the Court offices are still open.”

The men were stunned. Muriel simply made a cup of coffee, and sipped it. Alice gathered up her papers with finality. And Taylor simply looked at them, with black, glowing

eyes that had red dots that seemed at once far away and close to the surface.

Finally, Alice broke the silence. "Marshal, is there anything else you need me for?" she asked.

"Nope. I think we've covered all the points. And I know how to reach you if the situation changes," he said.

"Muriel?"

"We're good, Alice. I think this is going to play out, here, without it ever reaching court. Taylor, in his position as Lead on this, can let you know if they finally decide they want to stay in the country," Muriel said.

"WAIT! WAIT! You can't do that to us!," the leader of the group said. "What about our families?" And Alice halted her beginnings at translating out.

"You should have thought about that before you started a failed action," Taylor said. "Now, by your inaction, you're deciding you want to leave the country. Muriel, what's it take to pull their abilities back to single stripe level?"

"Oh, about five seconds, each. Faster if I just ask one of my squads to come up and do it. They know how. In fact, they're who I learned it from," Muriel said. "Want me to go ahead with that? They've certainly shown no interest in getting the rest of the training and becoming intelligent, thinking, responsible adults. There's a nine year old in Carla's office that has more maturity than they do."

"But . . . what will we do? How will we live?" asked the leader.

"The same way that people have lived for countless generations. By scrabbling at some low paying job and worrying about how you're going to pay the bills," Muriel said. "And that's true whether you stay in the country or not. You took part of the training, then turned your back on everything the training stood for. Personally, I'd be just as happy to just dump you on Judgment Square and leave you there. I doubt you'd survive the experience, but that's all right. We'd notify your families, after you suicide because of what a hash you've made of your lives."

"NO!" his wail came out.

"Then choose," Taylor said. "Make it fast. If the Court closes before you have chosen, then you will have made your choice to leave the country and not come back. Nor will any other country in the realm accept you."

"All right. Hollingberry, withdraw it," the man said.

And Hollingberry moved like lightning, putting a form in front of the man, handing him a pen, and saying, "I want all of your signatures on this. You all took the action, it's up to all of

you to withdraw it.” And he got them. “Very well, gentlemen. It's done. Please don't try to use my office for any further work. You'll be turned away,” he said, then translated out.

“Gentlemen,” Muriel said, getting up and walking to the other end of the casual area as they rose to leave. “Something you should know before you go. You have, inside you, that which is capable of helping you make good decisions.” and she grew. “Your soul, which you are connected to, has vastly more experience than you do. But, because the human personality is always in charge, you've been overruling it all along the way.” And she glowed. “That soul is Envoy, and can help you,” she added, and wings appeared, mantled above them. “Come by my office, and we'll help you understand how to use your soul to make good decisions, and help you sort out what you've done wrong in your lives and make them right.”

“YOU'RE NOT HUMAN!” the leader cried.

“Actually,” Taylor said, from behind and above them, “she's quite human. And so am I.” And they turned and realized that their King, too was gigantic, glowing, and had wings. “What we were, you are. What we are, you are capable of becoming. What we can do, you can learn to do. Go to her office. Learn from her. I did. Go.” And he resumed his normal size and shape.

As they turned back, they saw that Muriel had also resumed her normal look. “Have a good day, gentlemen,” she said, and stood out of their way. They fled.

Behind Taylor, Alice was sputtering. “Really, Taylor. Feathers?” And she held one up.

“Ignore her, Taylor,” Muriel said, laughing. “That's an old joke, and I pulled it on Mata YEARS ago. Alice is trying to say that she thought you were a little down.” And they all laughed.

Chapter 31

Shucks and All
(Thursday morning)

"Morning, Muriel," Alice said, breezing into her office. "Hope you had a good night."

"Uh, huh. Sounds like YOU did," Muriel replied, grinning.

"Now, now. Petty, petty," said Alice, laughing. "I ain't talking. However," she added, changing the subject before it got too out of hand, "your comment about how nations recognize the marriage laws of other nations took care of one lawsuit. I pointed that out to the lawyer, and sent him the certificate, and he talked to his client. Motion withdrawn."

"Great! What about the restaurant dudes?" Muriel asked.

"Now, there was a case of where I didn't have to do a thing. The judge sent a note back to the lawyer, pointing out the fact that citizens have the right to act in cases where obviously illegal activities are going on, particularly where there is a threat to the well-being of other citizens. Basically, it's like the American 'self-defense' or 'stand your ground' laws," Alice said.

"So their lawyer got that one pulled, too, huh?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, yea. Lawyers feel a little nervous when a judge tells them that their case has no ground to stand on, and no wings," Alice said. "Makes them wonder why they're in the business."

"Oh, well THAT'S obvious. They're in it for the money," Muriel said. "No matter which side loses, the lawyers win."

"You GOOF! Not all of us are like that," Alice said.

"No, you're right," Muriel said, seriously. "And I apologize. There are good lawyers. People that really DO want to do a good job and not just make lots of money. And you and the ones in the American Enclave law office have proved that over and over. I should be thanking you instead of poking at you."

"So, why are you poking at me?" asked Alice.

"Because it's so much fun to watch you squirm," Muriel replied, primly. And Alice screamed in frustration.

"So, what's on for today?" asked Muriel.

"Nothing much. I've got the information from the local Triple E, and the lawyers office

in the British Enclave. And I've sent them the information on the action that occurred, here. In fact, when I did, they suddenly realized that they really WEREN'T being supplanted. That this office wanted to be able to work with them and cooperate with them. Apparently, Taylor ran rough-shod over anyone that tried to pull stuff on him, down there. They consider you to be much gentler. They should have seen you, yesterday," she said, and giggled.

"Well, Taylor picked up on it, and doubled it. I'm expecting the first few to come see me, today, or I'd be out wandering around, trying to see what I could do to get into trouble," Muriel said.

"You have to try?" asked Alice.

"Well, sometimes," Muriel said. "Though it does look like more people are beginning to actually use the techniques in their everyday life."

"Maybe more than you think. Car sales are down, here. Even ours. At least that's what Triple E says," Alice said. "Out of curiosity, what would you have done if you'd had to move your office?"

"Oh, Probably looked around for a vacant warehouse, and had Carla move everything there," Muriel said. "It really didn't worry me. They were out to inconvenience Taylor and I by not having us in close proximity. They really didn't think it through. For people that can translate, there is no inconvenience caused by distance."

"True. As I well know. Well, I've got to get back. I have interviews to run for receptionist and office manager. Your two look to be the winners, but I've got to at least LOOK like I'm being honest," Alice said with a grin. "And just as soon as they're trained, Beth and Susan can go back to America. I think they miss folks there."

Muriel smiled as Alice translated out. It was good that she seemed to enjoy being in Britain. Muriel DID worry that she was on a work visa, and might have to leave, sometime. But it was only a minor worry. She'd talk to Taylor about getting her an honorary citizenship that would allow her to stay.

"Oh, oh," Mata said. "Incoming. I think you're going to be busy for a bit. Three men, and I think they're part of that group you saw, yesterday."

"Hmm. Yea, you're right," Muriel said, looking them over. "Mata, do all of the squads have the latest from Caleb and Sergeant Carter? We may have to do some work on them before we let them take the trip to Home."

"Yep. And I've got some Envoys from Home lined up to handle any of them that don't want you or any of your squads to help them through the process of self-examination," Mata said.

"Good. Thanks. Show them right in when they get here," Muriel said, and moved to her recliner.

And moments later, she was saying, "Come in, gentlemen. Have a seat. What can we get you?"

"Um . . . nothing, ma'am. We came to see about taking the trip to Home," one said.

"Uh, huh. Well, first, you need to clean up your lives a bit. If you went to Home, now, as you are, you'd have a very rough time of it, and would likely suicide," Muriel said. "However there is a way around that. It's not easy, but it will help you. Now, I can understand if you don't want to have others know what you've done in the past that caused harm to others," she added, gently. "So here's what I can offer you. There's a whole room full of Envoys that can help you . . . individually and without my knowing anything. Or, we can get Envoys in from Home. Really. It's hard enough to go through a self-examination. We want to make this as easy on you as possible."

"Um . . . these Envoys, here, won't tell you anything?" he asked.

"Nope. This isn't for me. It's for you. It's to help you get back into balance. Then, we'll show you how to get to home – oh, and go along with you to make sure you do it right – and you'll understand just how important balance is," Muriel said.

"Um . . . then you might as well use them," he said.

"Squad three," Mata said, "three temporary rooms, then three volunteers for Judgment duty. Make them outside, so they won't feel intimidated." And unbeknownst to the committee to remove Muriel from her office, one of squad three silently became a male.

It was a half hour before all three were back in Muriel's office, nursing mugs of tea and shaking. "It will never be that bad, again," Muriel said. "That's what the balance is for. And we'll show you how to find it, and how to use it so that the decisions and plans you make are good ones. In fact, why don't we do that, now, so you'll KNOW you're in control. It's really easy. Just close your eyes and get in contact with your soul. Go deep, and you'll find it. And ask your soul to show you your balance and how to tell when something is good or bad."

And they did. And slowly the shivering stopped, and they sat up straighter. And so it went, step by careful step, getting them calmed down and explaining what would be happening next, and how to do it. And when she'd finished, the same three that had walked the men through the Judgment process monitored their trip to home and back.

"Gentlemen, you are now Citizens of Home. There are a few more things to go over with you. But nothing as dramatic or traumatic as that. The first is that you now have a passport that declares you as Citizens of Home. You can go back anytime. You can visit friends and loved ones that have made the trip as one-way visitors," Muriel said. "And in a few moments, you'll receive a 'battlefield first aid' course that will allow you to help people that have been in accidents, fires, just about anything that doesn't actually kill them outright. And we'll give you information on courses you can take for free to help you with your jobs."

The men looked at the passports, and realized what they had just done. Two cried. One just looked shell-shocked. Perfectly normal reactions to the experience that Muriel had witnessed many times, and she let it run its course. Following that, Betty came in and gave them the first aid course and talked to them about their jobs. A short while later, they had diplomas for what they needed, and the assurance that they could always come back for more. And Squad three took them and their car to their respective homes, and cautioned them to take a break before they tried to do anything that required concentration, like translating.

"Muriel," Nancy said when she returned, "we need to come up with some version of a Guest House. Those men were pretty badly traumatized. I left three of the squad in stealth with them, just to make sure they're all right."

"Good point. Any old hotels in this town that we can buy and rebuild?" asked Muriel. "I know staffing won't be a problem."

"I don't know. But I know who might. I'll check around and see. Then run it past legal to do the actual work on buying it. You'll probably have to sign something, but we can take care of the rest," Nancy said.

"Thanks, Nancy. And thanks for thinking of putting squad members on them until they've settled in."

"Oh, no problem. Relax, girl. This will all shake down in time. And that's what we're here for is to see to these little problems," Nancy said. "To be perfectly honest, I didn't think you could pull it off this time. They may not have looked it, but they were even worse than Clyde or Fred to get through the process."

"Clyde and Fred didn't have human experience to compound things," Muriel said. "And I'll agree. I was beginning to wonder. I just hope their souls will calm them down. This one could easily go against me."

"Is that what your balance says?"

"No. But a lot, now, rests on what happens with them. And that's all out of my control," Muriel said.

"But you're still showing to the good?"

"Yea. OH! It's not projecting any problems. Is that what you mean?"

"Yep," Nancy said. "It's saying that with everything in place, it still thinks that it will work out."

"Hmm. Nancy, I've used you and your squad for troubleshooting, before. Probably more than any other. Should I rely on you for the tough ones?" asked Muriel.

"You can. We don't mind. From the troubleshooting side, we may be almost on par with you. We have to think it through, where you do it instinctively, then chew your nails over it," she said, grinning.

"You're right, there," Muriel said, smiling. "OK, squad four is training, squad three is troubleshooting, and squad one are the diplomats. What's squad two?"

"What they've always been. Housekeeping. Or hadn't you noticed?" asked Nancy.

"I hadn't, really. I know Chuck does my cooking. I never really paid attention to anything else."

"They do it all, from unplugging and fixing plumbing to dusting and vacuuming. They're your caretakers," Nancy said. "And much of this was by our own choice. We kinda fell into these areas, then started learning more as we went along. And we pretty much succeeded. Nine years, and you never realized that we had specific areas of expertise, except for Betty and squad four."

"Now, you're making me feel bad."

"You shouldn't. You didn't need to know. And it was almost a game to us. How long can we keep Muriel from finding out. I think we did pretty good at doing our jobs, if we could manage this so carefully that you didn't notice," Nancy said, grinning. "So, thanks for the left-handed compliment." And she snickered.

"Well, thank you. And thank your squad for doing exceptional service," Muriel said. "And I'll be sure to thank the others, too."

"No need," Mata said. "They've been following along, and grinning. And I'm not going to try to find out who won the office pool. OR what they won. I'm just glad you finally know. Makes my job easier."

"So, why didn't you say anything?" asked Muriel.

"WHAT! And ruin all their fun? They've been giggling about this for NINE YEARS. Muriel, working for you is an experience and a challenge. Sure. But it's also fun," Mata said. "Even with all the problems there have been, watching you work your way through them and find new ways of doing things has made it all worthwhile."

"Well . . . if you say so. I just feel that I've been imposing on you."

"Nonsense. You've seen a problem and worked out solutions. MULTIPLE solutions, and with variations as needed to meet individual situations. You've upgraded training like crazy, yet still managed to use older techniques – like today – to handle the unexpected," Mata said. "If anything, we've imposed on you, by loading you down with the leadership. But you've always handled it as if it was just a small part of who and what you are, and just get on with the job. We LIKE working for you. So, allow us a little fun where we can get it."

“Well, I guess I'll have to, since you manage me so well,” Muriel said. And Mata gulped. Maybe Muriel was learning TOO much about them.

“Nancy,” Muriel said, turning back to her, “it occurs to me that way back when, nine years ago, you volunteered to take Melanie back to the Guest House, and see to her getting home.”

“Uh, huh. Found out. Melanie needed a few other things that you didn't know about or think about at the time. Mata knew we were troubleshooting, and asked me to volunteer, so I could teach her how to translate objects ahead of her,” Nancy said. And Muriel looked at Mata. Seemingly obviously, Nancy went on, “So, I took care of her car, taught her how to translate things and move them after they'd gotten there, and taught her how to open up those pictures – expand them to fill the available space and mount them.” Muriel was still looking at Mata, who had the courtesy to blush. “Oh, and I went with her to her office, to back her up in her confrontation with her boss. She didn't need it. She had it thoroughly under control.”

“Mata?” asked Muriel, softly, “is there anything else you'd like to add?”

“Me? WHAT! Me? No. Nothing,” Mata stuttered out.

“Hmm. Well, I'll let it pass for now. But somehow, I don't think I'm being managed as much as maneuvered,” Muriel said. “We WILL talk about this, later, once it's filtered through my brain and I know what I want to say. Or ask.” And Mata KNEW she was in trouble. But, maybe in a good way. After all, she'd managed the first goof – the one over the phone.

Chapter 32

Building Plans and Minor Additions

(Thursday afternoon)

"Taylor, how can we do this?" Muriel asked over lunch. "We need a Guest House, for when we train people. Especially ones like that 'un-committee'. I had three of them this morning, and Nancy left three Envoys in stealth to make sure they were all right. It was a rough training session."

"Well, you need a building," he said.

"Already being worked on," Muriel replied around a mouthful of food. "Alice will get back to me when it's time to sign. It's the intent to buy an unused warehouse, and rebuild it. No, what I'm worried about is the fact that there'd be unrestricted access to it. At the rates we charge, we could quickly fill it up, and I'd be back where I started. And on top of that, it would be manned by Envoys, and we've never had a clear ruling on the status of Envoys in ANY country."

"OK, I think we can work out the unrestricted access, and charges. The Envoy thing . . . yea, that's a question," Taylor said.

"Is there . . . you know . . . a way to set it up?" Asked Muriel.

"Not that I know of. I can check with my lawyers about immigration and customs and . . . no, come to think of it, that wouldn't work. Envoys aren't immigrants. Hmm. Tricky," Taylor said. "And something I'm going to have to think about. You know, this actually goes to Envoy trained people, too. We've been getting around it by translating to Enclaves. But we need something in place to allow those with training into ANY country. I'm going to have to think about this."

"Well, I'm not worried about ALL countries right now. Just two of them," Muriel said. "Britain and America. Those would be the easiest to handle, and might give us a direction to go in with the others."

"Hmm. I might be able to push trained and Envoys onto the list of those that don't need visas to enter the country. The down side is that the Envoys would have to carry passports. The trained already have them, or are being searched out to get them to them," Taylor said. "I'll look into that."

"Well, I can almost guarantee that Envoys could have passports tomorrow. We might change the color of them to indicate that they ARE Envoys. And the documentation would show that they are, of course. Would that help?" asked Muriel.

"Definitely. Run it by your crew, and see what they say. If there's a problem, let me know, and I'll see what else we can come up with."

"OK. I'll do that. In the mean time, I'd probably better get back to my office and see what's come up in the mean time," Muriel said, finishing her lunch, kissing him good-bye, and translating out.

"She's still trying," Chuck said, clearing the dishes from the table.

"Oh, no doubt about that. And for ALL her people," Taylor said. "How'd I get so lucky?"

"You worked at it. She didn't want perfection. She didn't want to change you," Chuck said. "She just wanted you to be able to stand on your own. And you made it."

"You think so?"

"No question," Chuck replied. "When she said that you'd graduated, she stopped trying to push you to mature. You'd demonstrated that you could stand firm against some of the worst pressure that could be applied to you. Not only that, but you included compassion and understanding in handling it. Yea, you made it. Now, where you go from there is up to you. I'd better get back. Done here?"

"Yep. I need to get back to work, too. Thanks, Chuck. And thanks for talking to me," Taylor said, smiling at him. Then he nodded and translated back to his office.

And, when Muriel translated to her office, there were two people in her casual area. "Here," Alice said, handing her a cup of coffee, "you'll want this.

"OK, what's the problem," Muriel made a statement of the question.

"We have a building, just as soon as you sign this," Alice said.

"Uh, huh. But there's a problem, and Carla's here," Muriel said. "You might as well tell me. I'm going to find out about it anyway."

"They want us to use traditional materials," Carla said.

"Is that all?" asked Muriel.

"Isn't that enough?" asked Carla. "We make all our buildings out of shields!"

"Uh, huh. And what's the next step after shields?" asked Muriel. "Or is it that you don't know how to figure the loading for the materials. Jeff did it. Ask him. Or don't you remember your first office building."

"You . . . you are a nasty woman, Muriel White," Carla said. "You're challenging me!"

"Nope. Just asking," Muriel said, smiling quietly.

"Nope. You're challenging me," Carla growled. "OK, challenge accepted. But it might take a day. And what did you want for 'interview' booths?"

"Good question. We put up temporaries outside," Muriel said. "Nancy would know more about it, and how they worked and what the drawbacks were."

"Well, at least you went to the professionals," Carla said. "She's worked with me before, and took all the courses I have. I may just borrow her for a bit."

"Feel free," Muriel replied, grinning.

"You're STILL a nasty woman, Muriel White. And don't think I will forget this!"

"I should hope you don't forget it. After all, growth is what humans are all about," and ducked, laughing, before Carla could hit her. "Seriously, Carla, if it's too much for you . . ."

"Don't you DARE say it," Carla said. "I'll work it out. I may borrow Jeff for some of the engineering, but I'll work it out. Do you want the walls to retain their shield characteristics?"

"Yea," Muriel said, seriously. "I think we'd better. Protection, definitely, and sound-proofing. In fact, maybe you could put the 'interview' booths at one end of the training room."

"Well, that simplifies things," Carla said. "OK, then Alice needs to get the building permits, and make arrangements for whatever government overseer we need. Hopefully, none. He'd have a heart attack watching us put it up. You remember how Sergei was with the building for the acknowledgment of China as an Enclave. I'll also have to see the site, so I have an idea of how many rooms to plan on."

"Alice, is this place going to be big enough for us?" asked Muriel.

"Definitely," Alice said. "It was a failed shopping mall. It's not in the best area – well, it isn't the worst, either. Mostly, it just wasn't located in such a way as to get the trade, and went out of business. Parking lot is already in. Carla just has to drop the building, and set things up."

"I'll probably kill the parking lot and rebuild, too. But that shouldn't be a problem. I do have one question for you, Muriel. Workers," Carla said.

"Oof! I see where you're going. Are the building regulations meant to drive the building industry, and is that the reason that they require specific types of building. Good question, and I don't have an answer," Muriel said.

"I do. Nothing is written down," Alice said. "But then, it wasn't written down in America, either. Yes, it's meant to keep the unions happy – or whatever passes for unions over here. So the building materials haven't upgraded since the second world war, except for a couple of areas."

"OK, I'm going to over-design it, then. I mean, from their point of view. It would naturally be over-designed just using shields made to look like building materials," Carla said. "You do know that it'll be off the grid, completely."

"I expected that. Our property, our way. If I have to put teeth in it, then the building industry will be the next thing to go. Besides, I think a good portion of the workers in construction are already trained. How long do you think it would take for them to be trained in Envoy building techniques. Not ALL of them are stupid," Muriel said.

"Are you kidding?" Carla said. "ANYBODY with training can build. And a lot of them have already gone over their homes and strengthened them, and fixed the wiring and plumbing."

"Oh," Muriel said, "I didn't tell you. Taylor's looking into how trained people and Envoys can come into and out of the country without putting up with customs. I specifically talked about Envoys, since the Guest House would be run by them."

"That ought to put some noses out of joint," Carla said. "They've got people that need jobs."

"Yep. But we need people that have the training, and we need people that go way beyond the expected surly attitude. It would take time to find them, and train them in what they'd need to know to do the job," Muriel said. "So, at first, it would HAVE to be Envoys. Once it's going, then we can see."

"You're flying with this one, aren't you?" Carla asked, kinda like a statement.

"Yep. Three men, only partially trained, and with a bad attitude. Nancy's got three of her troops in stealth at their homes to watch them," Muriel said. "I'd really rather not have that happen again. It was nasty. I had to force them through too fast and send them home, because I didn't have any place to put them where they could be cared for."

"I get the message. I'll get right on it. Can you give me to the day after tomorrow?" asked Carla.

"I'll give you whatever time you need, Carla," Muriel said. "I'm not pushing you. I'll deal with whatever I have to. I always have. I'm already going over what we did to see how I could have used resources better. I think I see some ways that could have made it gentler."

"You're not doing it just for these guys, are you," Carla's flat statement came out.

"Nope. This city has a bunch of homeless. I want to reach them, and a place where I can, train them. It would give people – families, in many cases – a place to get back on their feet. There's kids out there, Carla."

"Uh, huh. Never mind. I'll get it. Alice has shown me the property. You've given me

an idea of what you want,” Carla said. “I’ve just got to get the look and the engineering right. I should have that by tomorrow afternoon. So, if you’ve got the property, and zoning is soothed, and the inspectors beaten over the head with their own I-beams, we should be good to go. Now, let me get out of here and get to work.” And she translated out.

“OK. All I need is your signature on this. I can notarize it,” Alice said.

“Wouldn’t it be better if I did it in front of the bank officials, or whatever?” asked Muriel.

“In this case, no. I want you to sign it as the Duchess, Muriel White. If they see who you actually are, it could queer it,” Alice said. Muriel took the hint – it’s easy when it comes with the force of a two-by-four up against her head – and quickly signed where it was marked.

“OK, now zoning. That was a bit of a fight, until they realized that it was like a hotel that had a restaurant in it,” Alice said. “I have no idea why they fought so much, but I have a hunch that another developer wanted to tear down the block and build apartments. We’re getting one small piece, right in the middle of where they wanted to put the apartments. So, we’re paying more to get the place away from them. Basically because WE bought the entire block. I think we can use it.”

“The whole block was empty?” asked Muriel.

“Oh! No. There’s shops and stuff that are managing to stay self-sufficient,” Alice said. “They were selling for less than the shops in the mall, and for the most part had the same inventory. It was a developer that was trying to do some block-busting. But he got greedy, and held onto the property himself, and just rented space out. And the rents pushed the prices in the mall up. It lasted six months, and folded. So, now we own the properties around there, and we’ll go in and fix up the shops for them. And reduce the rents. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Nope. Best solution, from what I can see. OK, I’ll go agitate Taylor and see where we stand with using Envoys,” Muriel said. “Thanks, Alice.”

When Muriel got back to Taylor’s office, he wasn’t there. “He’ll be right back, he said,” was Janice’s smiling remark.

“Sit down, gentlemen,” his voice rang out from behind her. Muriel looked around her shoulder, making it look like she was just there talking with Janice.

::The heads of Customs:: Janice sent. ::He called them and asked them to come to his office. They refused::

“Gentlemen, when your boss makes a request, it’s an order. It isn’t subject to your interpretation. It isn’t subject to your approval. It means you jump and on the way up you ask ‘how high,’” Taylor said. “NOW, I think you’ve gotten the impression that maybe, just maybe, I CAN enforce my orders. Have you figured that out yet? Do you understand just how far you overstepped your bounds?”

"Oh, get over yourself," the elder man said. "We both know that you're being led around by that hussy you've taken up with, and that the only reason you want these people to wander through our country is to please her. What's wrong? Not getting enough?"

DON'T KILL Murial broadcast, then walked over to the men. "Taylor, where did you find these bottom feeders?"

"Stay out of this, whore," the man said.

DON'T KILL Taylor broadcast back.

"Good point, Taylor. So, these are the heads of your Customs department?" At Taylor's nod, Muriel pulled out her phone. "Well, let's just see what we have here. Oh, my. Taylor, have you run an investigation of these men? It's interesting reading. Here, I've got the scale of duties on one side – the costs they're supposed to be charging people for what they bring into the country. And on the other side, what these men are actually charging. VERY interesting reading. OH! And the amounts they're reporting are only what the scale says. So, let's see where the rest is going, shall we? Uh, huh. Offshore. Cayman Islands. Quite a tidy sum, too."

Taylor had pulled up a tablet and was looking at the same thing. "You're right. Very interesting. Well, they're frozen now. We'll just claw it back, since they haven't paid any taxes on that money. I'm sure Britain can find some use for it. Thank you, Your Grace. Gentlemen, I'm afraid that your services will no longer be needed. You've got enough in your personal accounts, here in Britain, to support you until you can find work elsewhere. You might have to be a bit frugal, but I'm sure you'll manage. Now, just let me write this up for you, formally. Must get your names right," he said, consulting his tablet. "And one copy for you and one for the media. You're fortunate, gentlemen. I could be preferring charges against you. That's not to say that charges won't be preferred. Just that I won't be the one to do it. Janice, if you please?"

"Your Majesty," she said, retrieving the documents and sorting them out on her way across the office. "Here you are, sir. Your copies for the media, and one for each of you gentlemen. And, of course, I'll make file copies when you're through signing them."

"Ah! Good. Thank you, Janice. And maybe you'd also be so kind as to send copies to their department? That way, whoever is next in charge will be able to send them their personal effects," Taylor said. And shortly, the men were escorted out of the office by Regimental guards.

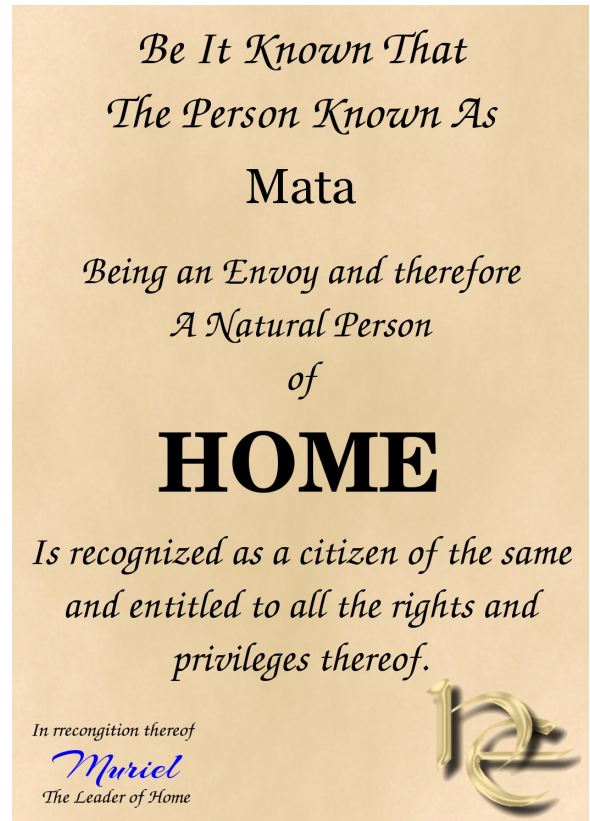
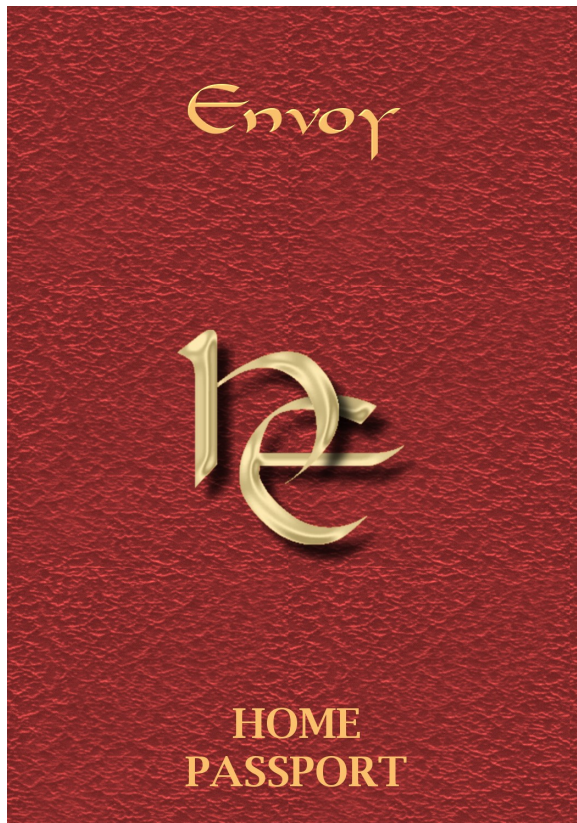
Once the door was shut, Taylor busted up laughing. "Oh, my word! OK, I'm pulling an investigation of ALL of the department heads. Oh, and I've still got to get with whoever is taking over Customs and make sure he realizes that ANYONE with a green passport is to enter and leave the country without hindrance. Likewise those with any passports marked as being from Home."

“Should we show them what the passports look like?” asked Muriel.

“Hmm. Now that's an idea,” he said. “Think Mata can come up with something that fast?”

“Oh, I'd bet on it, since she's just translated in,” Muriel laughed.

“Here you are, Your Majesty,” Mata said, pulling out a dark red passport.



Chapter 33

Mission of Mercy

(Saturday)

"Excuse me, miss, could I see some identification, please," the police officer said. Carla took out her Home passport and handed it to the man. "I'm sorry, this doesn't appear to be a valid passport from a recognized country. I'm afraid you'll have to come with me."

"Oh, really," Taylor said. "Officer, who is your commander?"

"Sir, I'll have to insist that you stay out of this. Police business, sir. I'm sure you understand," the officer said. Taylor just smiled, and brought in the Commissioner Smythe of the Metropolitan Police by translating him from his office.

"Sorry to interrupt you, sir, but I was wondering if this was one of yours," Taylor said.

"Yes, of course. Is there a problem, Your Majesty?" Smythe said.

"Well, it would seem that even after that little talk I had with you, this man doesn't recognize a passport from Home as being valid," Taylor said.

"Ah. Well. Bradford, do you remember the briefing you were given this morning? And that you were shown a passport, and told that anyone holding them should be considered as normal British citizens? You DO remember, don't you?"

"Sir, they're not from this country. And I've been given nothing to show that there even is a place called Home," the officer said.

"Really! Then you're not trained? No, of course you're not. No stripes. I'll have to talk to your sergeant. NOBODY is supposed to be out on the streets that isn't trained," Smythe said.

"Well, while he's here, we do have a different one, now, that he might as well learn," Taylor said, and Mata obligingly held up a dark red one.

"By the way, Muriel, you REALLY need to add the stripe to your pants, now," Mata added.

"Aw, c'mon! Mata," Muriel said.

"Nope. Time to do it. Unlike the gray, the lighter color uniforms would show it off, nicely," Mata said. "And you'd see where I got the color of the passports from."

"What?"

"Yep. Because of you, we've seen a lot of action. Mostly against you. But we survived it," Mata said, and GRINNED.

"You goof. I'm not putting a red stripe on my pants. I'd look like I was leading a band or something," Muriel said.

"A band of what?" asked Mata, innocently. "Or is it a rubber band. Hat band? Brass band? Oh, I know! A band of hippies!"

"Grrr! Wait until I get you home, young lady. You'll discover some stripes in places you would really rather not have them," Muriel said. By this time, Taylor was openly laughing. "NO STRIPES! It's bad enough that I let you talk me into putting them on my formals. I'm trying to get people to trust me, not be afraid of me. Unless they really piss me off, that is. THEN, they learn what fear REALLY is, and I don't need a red stripe to show them that."

"Then I suppose that your security squads will just have to wear them for you," Mata said, and six Envoys suddenly had red stripes on their pants. And the 'Security' triangles on their shoulders turned red, too, with gold lettering.

"Actually," Taylor said, between laughs, "That looks pretty good. Rather military, and very official. They could lighten up their uniforms, some, too. Like about halfway between what they are and what yours is." And the six lightened their uniforms. "Yep. Sharp. I like it."

All this time, Smythe and Bradford were just staring at the antics going on, and were startled by the changes in the uniforms. "Smythe," Taylor said, seriously "Bradford, I suggest you get used to seeing those uniforms. Anyone wearing them is an Envoy, and thus authorized to be in the country. It also means that they're on duty to guard and protect the Ambassador. Is that clear? Now, Carla doesn't usually go around with a security force. She doesn't need to. Well, really, neither does Muriel. They're both deadly. Best ask politely, and when you see a green or red passport like that, just move along."

"Are you supplanting the Mets?" asked Smythe.

"Nope. Augmenting them with Muriel. But the rest? If they've made Ambassador, then they HAVE to behave in a lawful manner. Even more than regularly trained individuals, Ambassadors have to be careful to not harm anyone except in self-defense or defense of others," Taylor said. "Believe me, I know. Now, I'd like to know what Bradford was doing here, and why he stopped Carla."

"Sir, my sergeant said to look out for someone wearing a gray uniform," said the officer.

"Look out for. What did he mean by that?" asked Taylor.

"I thought that he meant that I should bring her in, sir," Bradford said.

"Uh, huh. Smythe, I'm not going to bypass you on this one. Either there's a distinct lack of training, here, or you've got a problem that needs to be solved," Taylor said. "It could

be as simple as clarifying instructions. Or, it could be something else. YOUR problem. Now, Bradford, there are two women here wearing gray uniforms. Why pick on Carla?"

"Sir, he was specific that it was a darker gray, sir," Bradford said, beginning to shake.

"Yet, before they changed the way they looked, Mata and some of the squad were women wearing gray uniforms," Taylor said. "Nope. Doesn't wash, son. Smythe, I'd like you to take him back to the Yard, and have a little talk with him and the sergeant. I'd appreciate if you'd let me know what you discover."

"Yes, sir," Smythe said, and quickly translated the two of them out.

"Interesting," Muriel said, as they moved toward the doors of the new Guest House.

"Yes. Isn't it," said Taylor. Mata, from behind Muriel, noticed that her pants now sported the 'thin red line', and the fabric of the pants was sharply creased. 'Interesting, indeed', she thought to herself with a smile.

"Carla, this parking lot is amazing! You used pavers instead of asphalt or concrete. How come?" asked Muriel.

"Two reasons. I know London doesn't get a lot of snow, but the parking lot is heated when the temperature gets below forty degrees Fahrenheit. The grooves between the pavers allow the water to run off to the edges, because of the slight slope to the parking lot. So, no accidents due to icing," Carla said. "Either with cars or people on foot."

"Good thinking. Not something that the untrained could do, but excellent thinking for public areas," Taylor said. "And what's with these lights? They don't look like they'd be able to provide enough light."

"They're brighter than they look," Carla said. "They only look like carriage lights. You can read a newspaper anywhere in the parking lot at night."

"You know, I'm beginning to see why Muriel thinks you're the greatest. You think about the problems, and put the solutions in whatever you design," Taylor said. "I've seen some monstrosities that were more problem than solution because some designer wanted to make things look fancy and didn't think about the consequences of what he designed."

"I know. Part of why I became a designing woman was because of the malls that I saw that had inadequate parking, or poor layout, or the worst was one that was so large that there were roads through it, and THEY combined the worst of inadequate parking and poor layout," Carla said. "Oh, and it had poor traffic flow, and access to the mall, too. It was barely all right in the middle of summer and at night – that's all one time – when there was very little traffic. But Christmas rush? Total gridlock."

In the mean time, while Carla and Taylor talked, Muriel looked over the building. Something nagged at her. Then, she realized what it was. The building looked like the

indistinct head and shoulders of a person with wings outstretched and partially curved around at the ends. No face – not really even the suggestion of one. Just the vague outline of the head and body, and of the upper part of the outstretched wings. And, that the figure was female. And it was totally white, behind glass panels that made it look like feathers on the wings, and clothing on the body.

“Um . . . Carla?” Muriel finally said, “That’s an Envoy in full display, isn’t it?”

“Nope. Look at the wing structure. Peregrine Falcon. And the figure is young – about sixteen.” And Muriel stopped, stock still half way across the parking lot.

“Me,” she finally said. “You modeled it on me. Indistinct, like when I glow, but still almost identifiable.”

“Yep. I’ve asked around. You’re the only one that displays with the falcon wings,” Carla said. “And the idea was when you go into the mantling pose, with the wings just starting to curve forward. A threat to those that would do harm, and a welcoming protection to those that need it. And in whites.”

“That . . . that is unreal!” Muriel said. “Why?”

“Why the figure in display? Or why you?”

“Both . . . I guess.”

“OK, it’s the welcoming figure of protection, gathering in those that need the protection, and sheltering them. So, the whole building is the symbol. And why you? Because you’re the one providing the protection,” Carla said. “You’re the one that people go to, even when they don’t know why. Even when they don’t know they’re going to you. And the same with you, when you go to them. You’re the one that finds people that are ready to change, or need help, even when you don’t know that’s what you’re doing. Taylor. Hanna. Anna, Ameera and Nadeeda, Chun, Ruth, George. The list goes on, and on. It’s like you’re a magnet for them. And if they can’t come to you, you go to them. Now, these last five that were acting out. You put the fear of you in them. Then turned around and welcomed them in.”

“And, you know, you did the same with us in school. Us twelve,” Carla said, reflectively. “We kid about you dragging us into Enclave, kicking and screaming. Well, that can also be simply showing how kids behave when they are over-enthusiastic about new adventures. We didn’t know what we were getting into – and, I think, neither did you. But we all did it, anyway. So, now there’s a larger than life version of you to help the people of London that need it. There’s just one thing I wish I had for the wall behind the reception desk in there.”

“What’s that?”

“A picture of you in full display, in whites,” Carla said, as if from far away.

"YOU GOOF!" Muriel hollered, embarrassed.

"Nope. You're the heart and soul of this place. In fact, I think you've caused it to be named. 'The Welcoming One'," Carla said. "Oh, well. Let me show you inside."

Inside, in ornate script across the front of the reception desk, was an inscription. It took Muriel a moment to pick it out, the script was that complex.

Come, all you that labor and are troubled, and I will give you rest. ■

"You're using words out of the Bible, now, aren't you," Muriel said, softly. And Taylor waited for the axe to fall.

"Close enough. The language is cleaned up a bit, but that's what it amounts to," Carla replied. "This is what that piece of scripture was actually all about. Helping others when they're in the extremes of what they can do, and can't go any further alone. Helping those that are struggling to find a way. Helping those that are about to lose themselves because they're lost in the world. Oh, I can't put words to it properly. Anyway, here, they can put down all the strain, frustration, fear, whatever. And get help and a place of peace. Here, they can be taken care of and work back into living. In that piece of holy trash, the reference was actually to death and afterlife – IF the person was worthy. You offer it here, without strings attached, to anyone willing to accept it."

Muriel looked at the front of the desk for a long moment. Then said, "Not an image. Not a picture. I know what you want, but I'll need help." And she turned and walked back outside. Once away from the building, she said, "I need eight images, equal distanced around me." And Muriel's squad, Mata, Taylor and Carla quickly picked eight points on a circle. A ninth figure popped in, looked around, then knelt down directly in front of Taylor, in front of her.

"I see what you're trying to do," she said.

"Hanna?"

"I just thought I'd visit. But now I know it was more than that. Look at me, Muriel. Just look at me, then do it," Hanna said.

And Muriel looked at the girl. She changed into her formal whites, but without the fly plaid. It would simply confuse the issue, now. Also, no hat, and for the same reason. And she looked at Hanna, grew, and produced the wings. Then, slowly, began to glow until she was more of an indistinct blob – barely a figure with wings. She held that pose and position for a moment, then collapsed it back to her ordinary self.

"That's what you wanted, isn't it, Carla?" Muriel said. "It'll take an hour. Maybe two. But you'll have it. A sculpture of me. But really, it could be anybody."

"No. Not anybody. Only someone that cares as much as you do," Carla said.

"I'll have to work inside. It'll be too big to move, once I'm done," Muriel said. "And if the rest of you want to look around, I'll understand. I won't be very good company while I do this."

Her tablet downloaded the images from the others, and she gave it the impossible instruction

of creating a three dimensional image from the nine separate images. THAT was the easy part. Next easiest was to create a shield that resembled the indistinct figure, at the point where the feathers barely showed, but the identity didn't. And her friends and squad sat, quietly, watching – Hanna on the floor beside her, and connected to her mind to see how she juggled the whole operation. When she finally had it where she wanted it, she enlarged it to three times her size, removing the major portion of her body and wings in the process and placing it in position behind the desk, so all that was left was what the building showed. And it was huge. And the face appeared to be looking directly at the doors of the building. It would be the first thing that anyone walking in would be aware of.

The rest of the hour and a half was taken up with touch-ups here and there. Giving a better impression of feathers. A touch of wind-blown hair. The hint of a smile on the indistinct face. The depth of the eyes. The sense of moving without movement. The relaxation that was evident by the way she held herself. She didn't neglect the back of the figure, and the feathers and hair, there. But most of her concentration was on the front. The impression of peace, of caring, of gentleness. Finally, it was done, and she sighed and sat down with her eyes closed.

It took a few minutes, and nobody dared move and disturb her. But finally, she opened her eyes and said, "Whoosh!" Then looked around and realized that all her friends were still there, watching her. "Hanna? What are you doing here?"

"I just got the urge to come and see you, and you weren't in your office," she said. "So I tracked you and found you here. When I translated in and saw the building, and the way everyone was gathered around you, I realized what you were doing, and realized you needed a point of focus."

"Yea Yea, I did. Thank you," Muriel said. Then she looked around further. "Steve?"

"Wonderful!" he murmured. "Unbelievable. It's the building, but it's you." And he sighed. "I wish I could do things like that."

"Steve," Hanna said. "I've got how she did it. If she'll let me, I'll give it to you."

"Go ahead, Hanna. I don't mind," Muriel said. "More people should know how. It shouldn't be kept a secret." So Hanna dumped the whole thing to him, including the images that were gathered to make the sculpture. "I've got the pattern of the finished work," Muriel said. "I'll see if it can be miniaturized, tomorrow. Not today, I think. That took a lot out of me." And she sighed. "Let's see the building."

Chapter 34

Building Inspection (Saturday afternoon)

The building was a remarkable combination of engineering and design, and looked to be completely made of ordinary materials. Muriel knew that it wasn't, because of the sense of presence that is given off by shields. All the rooms and suites had an external exit as well as an internal one. The entire building could be evacuated in about five minutes, with no crowding or conflict. And all the rooms and suites for the guests were in the wings.

The body was made up of the large and high reception area, and the training room and 'interview booths', the restaurant on the second floor. The very top of the head held the offices for the manager and his immediate staff, though Muriel got the impression that he'd hardly use it. Like the manager of Guest House in the American Enclave, he was a hands on type of person.

They were treated to lunch in the restaurant, and Muriel found out that there was more than one chef. And that they'd all been trained by Chuck and a few of the chefs in the American Enclave, so that they could literally come up with anything on a moment's notice. And, while they were there, they discovered that this wondrous building already had guests.

"Where'd they come from?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, mostly the homeless," the manager said. "Some of them are people that are being foreclosed on, and thrown out of their homes."

"Those being foreclosed on, what happens to their personal effects and movable property?" asked Taylor.

"Oh, we went to the banks and bought the loans, then canceled them," the manager said. "When we were being trained, Ted told us that 'it's the sort of thing that Muriel would do'."

"Well, he was right, there. But why aren't they in their homes, then?" Muriel asked.

"Because they've been traumatized by the whole mess. They need a break from it, and a chance to reorganize. In some cases," said the manager, "they need work. We're working on that."

"So, you're doing my job for me," Muriel said, laughing.

"Well, more like carrying it out the way you would have done, and on your behalf," the manager grinned back. "We're keeping it to the most desperate for the time being. And leaving room for anyone that you might toss at us. This design is beautiful, but it can't really be expanded. So, we adapt to doing what we can with what we have. And so far, it's

working. People come in, their immediate needs are taken care of, they're trained if they don't already have the training, and given an education to be able to do what they're suited for. Then turned loose, back into society."

Muriel turned and looked at Mata. "WHAT?" asked Mata. "You already had Carla on the building. We just implemented what you wanted for staff and attitude! Honest!"

Muriel smiled. "Thank you, Mata. You did a good job of setting it up. And Carla, despite my shock at realizing what you'd done, yes, I can see what you were trying for. And you succeeded WAY beyond what I expected. I expected an ornate box. You've delivered an image . . . the realization of an ideal." And both of them blushed.

With lunch finished, and their thanks to the manager, they went back downstairs. About to leave, they noticed a man, transfixed in the doorway and staring at the 'face' of the figure behind the desk. And whimpering.

"May we help you?" Muriel asked, going to him.

"W-W-What IS it?" he asked.

"Just a statue – a sculpture. What the building was based on," Muriel said.

"It can't be! They don't exist!" he said.

"What doesn't exist?" asked Muriel.

"THAT!" he said.

"Oh, they exist, all right. That was taken from images made just a few hours ago," Muriel said. "The designer and architect of the building was working from memory. I provided the sculpture as my thanks for the work she did. And the images that were used for the sculpture were taken from life – from a model of a person from nine points of view."

"Impossible. Humans don't have wings!" And that did it. She caught the man's attention, then grew to twice her size. Then the wings went out, and she changed to her white formals and began to glow.

"Yes, humans have wings, if they choose to," Muriel said, quietly. "Humans have a lot of capabilities that you're not familiar with." He just looked up at her, the image of the sculpture, then fell to his knees, crying.

"NO!" he screamed, "NO! It will have to go. All of it. This building. It will all have to be removed. I cannot approve this. This religious symbol will have to go!"

"Who are you to approve or not approve this building?" asked Taylor.

"I am the building inspector. This building is condemned. It isn't even supposed to be

built yet. I only just got the plans. Nothing can be built without my being here to see the entire process. NO! You will just have to demolish the whole thing and submit proper plans and go through the due process of inspecting and sampling. You must prove that everyone that is working on the site has the proper credentials.” He turned to go, only to find his way blocked by Carla, who had circled behind him.

“We have samples of all the materials used in construction. And we have videos of the entire construction process,” Carla said levelly. “Nothing in the instructions said anything about religious symbology and, in fact, you’ve seen that it isn’t religious – simply taken from a human model. Nor was it specified that you had to be here, or that only persons that you pass as being certified would be able to work on the job. All the people that worked on this project have PhDs in Engineering and Architecture, and are more than qualified to work in construction. This building is safer than any other building in London. It will not be removed.”

“YOU! You . . . you unlicensed contractor! I will take this to the highest levels,” he screamed.

“Well, there I think I can help you. I can guarantee that your opinion is fast-tracked to the highest level that there is,” Taylor said, rotating the man around. “Hi. I don’t think we’ve met. My name is Taylor. Sound familiar? You just hit the highest level there is in this country – its King.”

“Oh! Your Majesty! I’m Howard Fairbanks, head of the City Engineers. Someone alerted me to a disturbance, here. Something about a building inspector,” a man said, coming through the doors and around Carla. “What seems to be the . . . oh. Williams, what are you doing here? This isn’t your project. I know, because I specifically assigned it to someone that could appreciate good architecture and engineering, and had the intelligence to understand that some things can’t be done using what YOU call standard procedures. Go home, Williams. This has happened once too often. I’m afraid I’ll have to let you go. We just can’t continue having these disturbances.” The stricken ‘Williams’ left, seething.

“Mister Fairbanks, you say someone alerted you?” Taylor asked.

“Oh, yes. Someone from your office. A Janice, I believe her name was,” Fairbanks said, and Taylor started laughing.

“Janice,” Taylor said and sent, “you might as well come see what the shouting was about. Besides, you aren’t even supposed to be in the office, today. It’s the weekend.”

“Sorry, Your Majesty. I felt the disturbance and homed in on you. Once I saw that insufferable little man, I knew what the problem was and contacted Mister Fairbanks,” she said as she translated in.

“No harm done, and maybe a lot of good,” Taylor replied, grinning.

“Well, Mister Fairbanks, I take it you’ve seen the plans for this building?” asked Taylor.

"Oh, yes! Amazing. SO nice to see something original cross my desk," he said. "Went over the figures – from the design I was afraid that the building would flex in a wind. Very shortly realized that it was way over specified. Weight loading, wind loading, moment arms, oh, all the petty details were all stronger than they really needed to be according to the regulations. And SUCH a design," he added, then caught a glimpse of the sculpture. "This wasn't in the original plans, but it's beautiful! Is this what the building was based on?"

"Sort of. I actually used several different views of the model," Carla said. "Oh, pardon me. I'm Carla, and I'm the Architect and Engineer for the project. Anyway, when the sculptor saw what I'd done, she graciously provided me with an accurate sculpture of what I'd been trying to suggest with the building."

"Oh, I'd love to meet someone that can create something like that. No real sense of identity, just a general feeling of peace and welcoming," Fairbanks said. "Would it be possible for me to meet her sometime?" And Muriel coughed. And blushed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Madam Ambassador. I didn't see you there," he said. Then looked at the sculpture and back at Muriel. "Oh, my! YOU did this, didn't you? I think I have miniatures of all your work. Glorious stuff. Loved the one of you walking beside yourself, into the future. And the one of Taylor leading the charge. I've been to Enclave and seen the original. About had a heart attack rounding the corner and seeing that, I'll tell you. VERY startling effect. And that little Russian girl. Was she someone you knew? Or just someone you saw?"

"The large one of Taylor was the copy. The miniature, twelve inch size, was the original size. All the originals are in my office. And Anna is the Ambassador to Russia, and I trained her in Envoy techniques. But her dancing and riding are done the old fashioned way, without using the techniques," Muriel said.

"Well, after seeing the sculpture you made, I can understand what set off Williams. He's been going through a bad time," Fairbanks said. "And when he started denying anything that even remotely looked religious, we had to pull him off of some projects and only let him deal with traditional jobs. May I ask, how did you rig someone with wings like that for the sculpture? Oh, wait, Carla said she used a model?"

"Oh, dear. Everybody's going to know. All right people," Muriel sighed, "give me some room." And as people moved away from her, she grew and produced wings, then turned on the glow.

"Oh, my. Oh, my word. It's real!" Fairbanks breathed.

"It's a part of our souls," Taylor said, quietly, as Muriel returned to her normal look. "Didn't you realize where you were when you took the trip to Home? Didn't you realize what Envoys were?"

"No. It never occurred to me. I met this man. An American Marine, I think. And we talked for about a half hour," he said.

"That Marine Sergeant is the father of the current US President," Muriel said. "He died when she was ten years old, killed in battle."

"Oh. Oh, my. Then that was"

"Yes. That's where Envoys come from. And where we all return when we die. And those of us that are trained can go there any time we like," Taylor said, quietly. "And that's where human souls come from. So, now you know how Muriel can appear like that."

Changing the subject, in an attempt to bring Fairbanks back into reality, Carla said, "I have samples of all the materials used, and videos of the construction if you like. I used Envoys to do the actual construction due to the need to get this up quickly. I don't know if you know, but there are many people that have been displaced – put out of their homes – because of the economy. Muriel's trying to help them – get them back into being productive and self-supporting."

"My word! Well, I'll have to sign the certificate of occupancy right away, then," he said. "Here, now, I knew I had it somewhere around here," he added searching through his 'no pockets, and finally coming up with a form certificate. "You don't know what a blessing it is to be able to just add things to a form with a thought. Here we go. Now, something to be able to put this on so I can sign it."

Carla produced a clipboard and held it for Fairbanks, and he signed the form. As he did, Muriel concentrated and created a miniature of the sculpture for which she was the model and the sculptor. It took some concentration, because Muriel wanted to make sure that the impression was right. So she sharpened some details and made others more indistinct. Then, she added something that she hadn't told Carla about. The sculpture would glow in the dark, and now, so would the miniature. When she was finished, she presented it to Fairbanks, and asked him where he'd like it put.

"Oh, my. I don't think I have anyplace ready for something this size. Can you just put it on my desk for the time being? I'll have to have a shelf built for it," he said.

"Let me know where and when," Carla said, "and I'll come out and do it for you. I might borrow one of Muriel's squad members, though. He's excellent with carpentry and cabinet work, and has done ornate shelves and frames, and such. I'm sure he could come up with something for you. Now, how about we show you around. I'm sure you'd appreciate some of the things we've incorporated."

"I saw from the plans. TWO ways out of every room? And no choke points? For emergency exiting? I've GOT to see that. Hotels and offices are the worst for getting people out. And apartments and townhouses are next," he said.

"I know. The trouble is that this only works where the building is just one room or suite thick. I could get away with it, here, because I did exactly that," Carla said. "It also helps that the building is self-contained. Water, power, garbage and sewage are all handled on

premises. Food is created, rather than made from raw materials. No danger of contamination that way. But that's for the health department to worry about. Each room or suite has two Envoys to take care of needs, and they're all doctors, too. They also do the cleaning and such. Guest House in the American Enclave has been very successful running that way, so we duplicated their ideas. That way, the staff is prepared to handle any emergency immediately. Air is filtered, even with windows and doors open. And our safety procedures go beyond those in any place except an Enclave."

"Are you intending to turn this into another Enclave?" Fairbanks asked Muriel.

"Nope. Britain already has one. It doesn't need another," she said. "No, this was originally set up because of some trainees that hadn't been completed. Carla saw the need to go further, and took it. And I'm glad she did. The rooms and service rival anything that any of the Enclaves have. Nope, this is for outside of an Enclave, where people with problems can come to work them out."

"But what do you charge for this service?" Fairbanks asked. "Surely it would only be available for the rich."

"Guest Rights," Muriel said. "People that come here are our guests, because of the problems they have, whether it's in training or just getting back into society. And guests don't pay. It's like a 'time out' from troubles and problems. Maybe you could say that it's our way of giving back to the people."

"You do realize, don't you, Mister Fairbanks, that the world is changing," Taylor said. "Economy is no longer in the hands of a few corporations or unions. This has caused an upheaval, and what Muriel is trying to do is bridge that gap, and get people back in their homes, and in jobs that they can do."

"Well, I can certainly see why you needed to get it built so quickly. I'd be pleased to work with you on any further projects," he said. "This really is amazing."

Chapter 35

The Picket Fence

(Monday morning)

. . . the entire building is surrounded by the protesters. Damage in the parking lot is estimated to be in the millions as they bash in windows and break headlights and tail lights and do other damage. Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Police are holding back would-be counter-protesters from reaching the scene. And in other news, miniature statues modeled after the giant one inside the building are flying off the shelves, and speculation is running high over who the model for the statue could have been.

"What?" asked Muriel, entering her office. "What's going on?"

"It would appear that the contractor's union is a bit upset with Carla's having done in one day what it would have taken them months if not years to TRY to accomplish," Mata said.

"Why aren't the Mets stopping them. They're on private property!" asked Muriel.

"Because they're busy holding back people that would try to stop the violence under the mistaken idea that they'd start a war with the protesters," Mata said. "How is it that you don't know about it? It's been going on since eight o'clock."

"I've been up since seven, and in a meeting with Taylor and three Ambassadors from other countries. Unbelievably, they were actually on our side. Cautious, and wanting to know our stand on things," Muriel said, "but not like that Italian idiot. Of course, one of them was from Russia, and he's seen what Anna has done to help that country. Mostly by making a target of herself. I don't think that Taylor knows about this, either."

"I do, now," he said from the doorway. "We're pulling a Muriel on the protesters. Double ring of the Regiment of Home containing them, and marching them to Met buses. And as soon as they were on the buses the Met police suddenly evaporated. The so-called counter-protesters are moving in and repairing the damage done to the cars. They were totally ignoring the ones that caused the damage, and just wanted to repair it."

"So, the opposing force are all trained?" asked Muriel.

"Yep. And you'll never guess who's leading them."

"George," Muriel said.

"Good guess. Wrong, but good. Nope, it was Ada and George's mother. George is quietly making sure things are running smoothly at the lawyer's office, and holding down the phones while his mother's away," Taylor said, grinning.

"Well, I'll be . . .," Muriel said. "Obviously, he doesn't feel it's beneath him to work at a

'woman's job' or work for a woman.”

“I'd say not,” Taylor agreed. “Alice has nothing but good to say about the both of them. They've reorganized some things, mostly by suggestion, and made work-flow run smoother than Alice had ever seen. George has got the office going all electronic, which has cut down on the use of paper, tremendously. The only thing it's used for, now, is the final output to courts and opposing lawyers. And his mother untangled the phone problem by talking with Jeff about creating a switchboard style phone. She was able to explain what was needed well enough for him to create a Private Branch Exchange on the spot for her, and now he's marketing THAT. And crediting her as the inventor, which is supplying her with a small additional income.”

“Oh, my. And Ada's in on it?”

“Yea,” Taylor said. “despite her supposed dislike for computers, she started calling people to help, and asking them to call others. And she specified non-violence. What's out there are people that you've helped, either indirectly through getting them the training, or directly, such as little old ladies whose homes you managed to save. These are people that understand what the balance is about. Jackie's down there, helping them to understand what their job is, too. She's got them organized into groups. One group goes through and does nothing but clean up the broken glass and plastic, and the next goes in and repairs the damage. The closest thing to trying to damage the building that there's been was the jerk that put an explosive device in the doorway. It went off before he could get away. But was contained by one of your 'inside out' shields, so that even the perpetrator wasn't hurt.”

“I've got an update from Commissioner Smythe, too,” Mata said. “His man took one look at the 'bunch of little old ladies', and felt that it was more important to protect them than stop the protesters. It was only after the Regiment arrived that he realized that they didn't need it. ALL of them were trained and had shields up. And he said to apologize to you for not realizing sooner.”

“No harm done,” Taylor said. “Maybe it was just as well that they did it that way.”

“Well, the media is finally getting it right,” Mata said. “Now, they're reporting on how the police 'saved' the little old ladies, and how the unions are now being investigated under the terrorist act that Britain has. They're also reporting on the senseless violence that the protesters caused, and how the 'counter-protesters' are repairing the damage. Oh, and somebody's interviewed the manager, and discovered that the building is being used to house the homeless, and help them become productive.”

::Your Majesty,:: Janice sent so Muriel could hear, ::the commissioner is here.::

“I'll be right up, Janice. Thank you,” he said and sent in return. “You want in on this? It's got to be about the mix-up with Bradford.”

“I'd like to, if I won't be in the way,” Muriel said.

"Well, come on, then. What's taking you so long?" Taylor said, and translated out.

"Men!" Muriel muttered, and translated after him. But she was smiling. And Mata shook her head and laughed to herself after Muriel had left.

Taylor was waiting for her outside the doors to his office, grinning. "About time you showed up," he said, opening the door, just as Muriel hit him.

"Commissioner! Good morning. Sorry I was out. Just getting an update on the riot," Taylor said.

"Oh, well, that's contained, and the individuals are talking about who directed them to picket that building, and how to behave," Smythe said. "They'll all be charged with trespassing, malicious mischief, and vandalism. We may up some of the charges as we begin rolling up the contractors' unions. Oh, and the man in charge on the scene is thoroughly embarrassed by the fact that he THOUGHT he was protecting the 'counter-protesters' from the violence and never picked up on the fact that they were trained and protected. Apparently, your Colonel of the Regiment read him the riot act over that one."

"However," he went on, "that isn't what brought me here. Bradford has been discharged. He'll never get another job in any police agency in Britain. Not even security forces. He finally confessed, after I'd talked to his sergeant, that it was the head of one of the unions that told him to accost Carla because she used non-union people to build the building. Wish I could apologize to her, directly."

"Seven hours difference, Commissioner," Muriel said. "She's probably still sleeping."

"Oh? But I thought . . ."

"She and her consort live in the American Enclave. She's very human, and needs her sleep. And her time with her consort," Muriel grinned.

"Oh! Oh, yes. Of course," Smythe said in some little embarrassment. "Well, if you'd pass my apology on to her, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course. So, you've got at least one union from two sides, then," Muriel said.

"Yes, it would look that way. They've been fighting any change in construction techniques for years. I think that will bring this to a head," Smythe said. "And to think that it was such an impressive and distinctive building that they picked on. That should have the architects scrambling to try to outdo her."

"They can try," Muriel said, "but without Envoy techniques they'll have some trouble doing it. Two days from conception to finished building. They'll have trouble even matching that. They might match the designs, but not the speed. Carla's put up an entire Enclave in two weeks. A more complex building than this one in a week, and that had carved panels in it."

"Oh, now that would be something to see," he said.

"She has images of it. The building, itself, is gone now. It was used for the signing with China. The space is now part of the Russian Enclave," Muriel said. "Speaking of China, if you ever manage to get over there, look at Ambassador Chun's offices. THAT was a tour de force. Carla recruited about two hundred Envoys from Home to put that up. And it was up in hours, complete with extremely impressive decoration on the walls, that looked like a giant brush painting."

"Well, anyway, I've taken enough of your time. I just wanted you to know that Bradford was sorted. And the fiasco with the picketers was due to lack of observation on the on-site commander's part," Smythe said. "I don't think that will ever happen again with him. He was extremely embarrassed when he told me what he'd done."

"Well, this is all very good news, Commissioner," Taylor said. "And I'm sorry if I came down hard on you the other day."

"Yes, well, you were right to. It WAS my job," Smythe said. "Your Majesty, I really want to keep on good terms with you. You don't ask the impossible of me. And I see where you and the Ambassador are trying to go. You're not out to disrupt society to make things easy for a small segment. You're out to help everyone. The conflict comes with those that don't want to or don't know how to change. And it's my job to see to it that it's orderly. I'm going through my departments and making sure that everyone is thoroughly trained. If your University of Home has any courses on law or police work, I'd appreciate someone passing them on to my people. Oh, and I'm recommending the same to all the other regional departments."

"That's fine," Muriel said. "And I think Betty may have something, or can put something together fairly quickly. We did much the same for the US Secret Service and FBI. The dumps of the information made it much easier to get people up to speed, and without the problem of misunderstandings. I've passed the information along, and you may get a visit from the head of my education squad."

"I'll be sure I treat her with respect," Smythe said, with a rueful smile. And he bowed to the King and left.

"Janice, what's next?" asked Taylor.

"Nothing, Taylor. The head of one of the unions WAS supposed to be here, but for some inexplicable reason, he canceled. I can't imagine why," she said, and grinned.

"Hmm. Yes. That could have been a bit awkward for him. I might even have had to chastise him," Taylor said, dryly, quipping back.

"Hmm," echoed Muriel. "You're getting quite good at that."

"Yes, well, Janice makes it easy. Oh, all the proprieties are kept. She's formal when

those not in the know are here. But things run much smoother, now, because she's not just 'doing what she's told', but actually trying to help me. And the humor helps, too," Taylor said. "Rather comforting, as a matter of fact, as it gives me a better idea of where I stand. When she's kidding, I know things are running smoothly."

"Oh, THERE you two are," Ted said, translating in. "Oh, sorry, miss. I didn't mean to startle you," he added to Janice, tossing his passport onto her desk. "Muriel? What's with this new sculpture I'm hearing about. Steve's been going on and on about how you modeled for it, then produced it from nine points of view, and that it's you but isn't you. And apparently they're flying off the shelves in Enclave. They've started producing them in batches."

"Carla built a building for me," Muriel said.

"Yes, yes, I know about that. She says that it's some of the finest work that she's done," he replied, casually retrieving his passport by pulling it out of a 'no pocket', then putting it back.

"Well, she designed it based on a number of episodes of me, including one of me in full display," Muriel went on, as if she hadn't been interrupted. "The whole building looks like the head and shoulders of me with wings displayed. And the wings hold rooms and suites for those unfortunates that have been the victim of the economic downturn. When I realized what she'd done, I made a sculpture that showed me as glowing – therefore indistinct and not readily identifiable – and with the wings in a half-mantled position. She's calling the building 'The Welcoming One'." She produced an image of the building as she'd first really seen it, and showed it to him. Then produced a miniature of the sculpture. "Imagine coming through the doors, and see this looking at you."

Ted shivered. "It would either make you believe that you belonged there, or scare the hell out of you," he said. "Do you suppose they'd mind if I visited to take a look at it?"

"I don't see why they would mind. It's run by Envoys, right now," Muriel said. "I understand that they're intending to hire humans for some of the positions. But right now, it's all Envoys. And the rooms and service rival the American Guest House. So does the cooking. We had lunch there, when we went to see the building, and it was great."

"Well I'll have to get over their and see what the competition is like, then," Ted said, and turned around. "Young lady, I apologize for startling you. I'm so used to popping in on Muriel that I wasn't thinking."

"Quite all right, sir. I'm sure His Majesty understands, too," Janice said.

"Oh. 'His Majesty', huh? Yea, I guess you don't really know me or how shocked I'd be if you called him by name. I'll let him tell you where he and I stand," he said, smiling. "Gotta go. See you all later." And he translated out. Taylor just laughed.

"Janice," he finally said, "Ted's as bad as Muriel for popping in and out. He just won't admit it. I've known him only slightly longer than I've known Muriel. It was at an American

President's dinner. My parents and I were there, and the President's herald announced Ted. He plowed his way through the crowd and greeted the President, then my parents started talking with him. And the herald announced 'The Outrageous Ambassador, Muriel', and I heard a mental giggle in my head. She appeared over the crowd, walking DOWN the air, directly toward me. She knew what my problem was, that I was hearing voices in my head, and took charge immediately. And she's been taking charge of me ever since." And Muriel hit him. "Oh, and Ted's always called me Taylor, ever since Muriel found out that that's what I preferred."

"Yes, sir," Janice said, smiling. "I'll put him on the casual list, then, shall I?"

"By all means. He was instrumental in helping me set up the British Enclave, and starting the Regiment," Taylor said. "I consider him a friend, and one that I can trust."

Chapter 36

The Picketed Fence

(Tuesday morning)

“OH, MY GOSH! Muriel! You've got to see this,” Taylor hollered from their living room. Muriel translated in to here a news broadcast.

. . . Reports are coming in that this is happening everywhere in Britain. The picketers are orderly and non-violent, But NOBODY is able to cross their line. The unions have sent out men to force them to leave, and the picketers just ignored them. So they brought out clubs, and started attacking them. And STILL the picketers ignored them. In fact, the clubs stuck in something a foot away from the picketers, and as you can see, are still there. We understand that the picketers are actually kidding each other about the number of clubs they acquire like that. One little old lady is dragging around a man that's at least twice her size. He tried to grab her, and now can't get loose. Police have been called, and they're not disturbing the picketers – they're arresting the ones attacking them. Is this the end of the unions?”

“Oh, my. Now THIS is something I hadn't seen coming,” Muriel said. “And people say that I'M outrageous.”

“Well, you are.” Taylor said, which earned him a dirty look. And he laughed. “This, though. This isn't outrageous, as such. It's a statement. People are tired of being overcharged for work, simply because the unions have the muscle to get wages raised for their members.”

“Well, there's nothing we can do about it. This is civilian,” Muriel said.

“No, but I can, and am,” Taylor said. “I've got a team looking at everything of the unions. Much the way you ran investigations in America, only I'm using civilians – citizens of Britain – to do it. When it reaches a certain level, I'll declare the unions to be disbanded. That'll be about the time that the leaders are arrested on various charges, including promoting assault of a peaceful demonstration on public property.”

“Well, at least you've got the media on your side.”

“This time. I think the difference is whether it's your crew and Envoys doing things, or British citizens doing it,” Taylor said.

“You could be right. I spent an awful lot of years being the target,” Muriel mused. “But I HATE seeing civilians taking the brunt of it. I'd better get to work, in case I have to call in help for these people.”

“Let me know, and I'll contact Jackie. It's still a British problem,” Taylor said.

“OK. Let me go, now.” And he did, and she translated to her office.

“It's covered,” Mata said, as Muriel translated in. “Fred's team has gone deep on this, and come up with various connections, including collusion between the unions to force the prices up, thus justifying raising the wages. And that's hard-copy. Your on-duty squad is passing the information to Taylor's team, now. Oh, and we intercepted a phone call between the national union heads. They intend to meet with Taylor to insist that he stop the picketing of them. That one we passed directly to Taylor. It was just as you translated in. Expect a call.”

“Wow! The morning news all at one gulp. Did you breath during that?” asked Muriel. And Mata just grinned.

“Seriously, he may want you to sit in on this. Formals?” asked Mata.

“Probably. I'll talk to Taylor before I arrive there, and see what he thinks,” Muriel said. Her tone was much more serious, now. “Anything good I can hit them with, that Taylor may not know?”

“Nothing that would pass the sniff test of the courts,” Mata replied. “Maybe you can get more out of them with leading questions.”

“Yep. That's what I was afraid of. Well, one thing I can hit them with is that their 'bully boys' are attacking Citizens of Home. And Home doesn't look kindly on that attitude,” Muriel said. “In fact, it would justify my being there when they meet with Taylor.” And she passed that thought to her consort, and got immediate agreement. He also suggested formals, and added that she should come right up, so it appeared that they were in discussion of a mutual problem when the men arrived.

“Gotta go, Mata. My master calls, and I'm away.” Mata just laughed. NOBODY was Muriel's 'master'.

“Well, dear, that was a short trip. Mata filled me in on the other side of it. You got the information about the collusion, didn't you?” Muriel asked.

“Yep. Take a seat. They're here. I've just been letting them stew until you arrived,” he said. And he was wearing his formal whites and crown.

“OK, hold on. I think we should be talking about the fact that they're citizens of both Britain and Home when they come in. It might pull some of the guff I expect from them about my being here,” Muriel said.

“Janice?”

“No problem, Taylor. I'll wait until you're ready to come up with something, then have them brought in,” she said.

"GAD! I enjoy working with you like this. MUCH more relaxed," Taylor said. "OK, I think I know how to lead off. Let 'er rip."

Then, as the men were ushered in, he said to Muriel, "Well, so far, this is just British citizens that are protesting against the high prices that are charged for plumbing and construction, and such. Purely a British affair."

"Yes, of course. But there's an added element," Muriel replied. "Those British citizens are being attacked by thugs armed with clubs. And those British citizens hold passports declaring them Citizens of Home. So, you can understand my concern. They're my people, too, and I feel honor bound to do what I can to protect them. I've held off, so far, just to have the chance to discuss this with you."

"I . . . oh, hello, gentlemen. Take a seat. I'll be right with you. Now, Muriel, I can understand your concern. But what harm can they really come to. I mean, they're protected by shields that nothing can get through. They can't be hurt by these men," Taylor said.

"Of course, but there's harm, and then there's harm. True, they can't be hurt physically. But someone with too much money and too much power COULD try to get them ostracized by public opinion," Muriel said. "That can be as harmful as an axe. Or a gun. When store owners refuse to sell to them, or friends begin to avoid them, it can hurt mentally and spiritually. No, I really must insist that something be done to stop the attacks on peaceful people simply showing their displeasure with the current events. If your police can't do something to stop it, then I'll be forced to call in Envoys to collect the attackers and hold them for the police."

"But what can I do?" asked Taylor. "The police are currently all occupied with trying to apprehend these people. It takes time, Muriel."

"You have the Regiment of Home at your disposal. True, they answer to Home. But they are ALSO British citizens, and answer to you. Call them out. I'm sure they could counter these attacks on innocent, non-violent protesters. It's not like that batch, yesterday, that were violent protesters, breaking things and trying to blow up a building."

"YOUR MAJESTY! I must protest. This . . . person isn't even a British citizen. And this is strictly a British concern," one of the union heads began.

"Excuse me? You're interrupting a serious discussion, here. And Her Grace, Muriel is very much a British citizen. That she also happens to be the Ambassador to earth and the Leader of Home simply makes this more delicate. She understands what's going on. Don't you, dear," he added, making it obvious that she was more than just a citizen and the Leader of Home. She was his consort.

"Well, I'd like to think I do. But maybe I've got it wrong. Tell me, sir," she said to the union head, "just how long have you unions been in collusion to raise prices as a justification for raising wages for your members?"

"I . . . WHAT? That's nonsense," he replied.

"Not according to this set of copies of emails from and to you concerning that very fact. I believe the first of them was dated in the nineteen nineties. This has been going on for a while," Taylor said. "Oh, and here's another one from you to the carpenter's union head, suggesting that they stage a violent . . . yes, that actually says that, here . . . a violent demonstration and picket of a new building that was put up by Home to house the homeless and destitute."

"I'm sure, if you turned my analysis team loose, we'd be able to come up with some other things, Taylor. Of course, it would have to be sanctioned by your government," Muriel said. "All that would be required is a request from you, as per the Treaty between Britain and Home." By this time, all the men were beginning to look a bit white, and very shocked.

"How are you getting our emails," one of them whimpered.

"Oh, that. Anytime there's the probability of criminal activity, checks are made on all sorts of things. Emails are only one, of course. Financials are another," Taylor said, to the obvious discomfort of all of the group. "You'd be amazed at what one can find in financial statements. The connections from and to, and such like. And, of course, some of the emails directly tie in to the financial statements. Like this one that advocated using inferior lumber in the building trades, and charging for the more expensive type. Oh, and this one that shows that you were paying off the head of the building inspectors to look the other way when such materials were used. You know, Muriel, this may be going farther than just the unions. Maybe we should turn your analysis section loose on it."

"Hmm. Good point," Muriel said. "And now I'm wondering if it's actually international. Perhaps I should alert Ted and a few others, and see what they come up with. And have you seen what is actually being paid to the union workers? I know it seems like a lot. But subtract the union dues and various other charges that they levy. Now look at the salaries that the union officials receive."

"Um . . . I think we'll just be going now," the leader of the group said.

"Oh, don't hurry away. I'm sure the police will be here, soon, to take you to your new homes," Taylor said. "I'm sure you wouldn't want to miss them. And I'm sure THEY'D hate to miss YOU."

The union leaders scrambled for the door. It was a short scramble, interrupted by the admittance of Commissioner Smythe and two squads of the Metropolitan Police. In short order, the men were searched and cuffed. And the officer searching the leader of the group held up a gun.

"Oh, dear. Now that's torn it. Weapons aren't allowed in the presence of a monarch without prior approval of the monarch," Taylor said. "Which means that the monarch must trust the person to defend said monarch. I'm SURE I never granted you such approval."

"But . . . this is just for protection!" the man exclaimed.

"Protection from what?" asked Taylor. "An unarmed monarch? Nope, the law is very clear. Weapons in the presence of your King without prior approval is considered treason. Go ahead, officer. Arrest him. Commissioner Smythe, I'm surprised to see you here, but also pleased. Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Well, there's my lumbago," he said, laughing, "but I really don't expect you could do anything about that." And suddenly, there was an Envoy behind him with one hand on his shoulder.

"Hmm," the Envoy said. "How'd we miss this? Ah. It's from too much sitting in the wrong position. Well, I can correct it, but it'll just recur unless you improve your posture, sir. If you like, I can have your soul suggest better posture to you until it becomes a habit."

"What? Really? Oh, my. Yes, go ahead," Smythe said, and laughed. "You people really DO think of everything."

"Well, you're one of us people," Muriel said. "It's our job to try to make life as pleasant as possible."

The gentlemen from the unions were ushered out with all the politeness that the British police are noted for. Of course, the union representatives weren't as polite, but that was to be expected. And Muriel giggled.

"You know, I don't think I've heard you giggle more than a half dozen times in nine years. But you seem to be doing it more and more," Taylor said.

"Taylor," Janice said, "Raids are going on all over the country right now. All the union offices are being closed and all their records taken."

"Are they looking for hiding places, too?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, good thinking!" said Taylor.

"Long experience. We've raided a few offices in our time, in America. Mostly in conjunction with Secret Service or FBI," Muriel said. "Walls, floors, dividers for cubicals. We've seen them all. Then there's the bright boys that try to hide correspondence in pictures. Now THOSE were interesting. We used to get all sorts of financial information that way. Oh, and orders for various illegal activities. Jeff's computers were amazing for what codes they could crack. The Met Police have the new computers, don't they? And the training to use them in advanced searches?"

And Taylor laughed. "Devious, Muriel. You just told me valuable information by making it look like you were just reminiscing."

"Well . . . I wouldn't want you to miss out on any of the good stuff," she said, coyly.

“And don't worry if you didn't catch it all, I believe Janice just passed the information to Smythe.” And she giggled again.

“You bet I did,” Janice said. “And they do have the new computers, and Jeff is sending his squad over to be sure their intelligence section knows how to use them. He said to tell you 'thanks'.”

“You can tell him 'you're welcome', Janice,” Taylor said.

“Not you,” Janice said, grinning. “Her.” And Muriel giggled. “By the way, Taylor, there's nothing else for you, today,” she added.

“Thank you, Janice,” he replied. Then to Muriel, “And you are still giggling.”

“Yes. I am. I wonder what's gotten into me,” Muriel said, coyly.

“Um . . . office, children,” Janice said. “I'm not sure I'm ready to learn what I don't already know.” And Muriel and Taylor translated out. And all that was left behind was Janice, smiling.

And Muriel's giggle.

Chapter 37

What a Wonderful World (Wednesday)

“Good morning, Mata,” Muriel sang out, as she translated in.

“Morning. You're famous,” Mata replied.

“Huh?”

“Oh, now THAT was intelligent. You're famous. There's an on-line art magazine that normally deals just with more avant-garde graphic design,” Mata replied. “You know, photos that have been manipulated in various ways so that you can't even begin to know what the actual subject matter was? Well, anyway, all the unwelcome interest in 'The Welcoming One' the other day resulted in various media showing the violence of the union thugs, and the peaceful cleanup and repair of 'ordinary citizens'. One of those shots apparently sparked the interest of someone that contributes to the magazine. Whoever took it was far enough away from the action that he or she was able to get the whole building into the shot.”

“Oh, oh. I can almost here this one coming. They're saying that the building's shape was the result of taking a photo as the basis of the design. Right?” asked Muriel.

“Nope. He or she did some research. The photo artist had a nagging single point memory of an event, and went looking for the source of the memory. All that person knew was that it happened some time in his or her childhood,” Mata said. And Muriel felt a cold draft.

“Why do you keep referring to the artist as 'him or her'?” asked Muriel.

“Because all the article references is the person's on-line nickname. No gender is implied in the nickname. Anyway, the artist came up with a view of you, when you were sixteen.”

“When I took on the Pope,” Muriel said. And the cold got colder.

“Yep. He or she was apparently a fan of yours, and got as many records of you and your events that were available,” Mata said.

“To get all of them the person would have had to be trained in Envoy techniques,” Muriel said.

“Yep. And that person got ahold of the time just before you made that famous proclamation. When you played the 'A' card, in your office. And it was the wings that the artist remembered – in half mantled position.”

"Heck, I didn't have room in there to go into full mantle," Muriel said. "He was too close to me and the chairs were in the way."

"Well, the artist pulled the image from the record, and compared it to the shape of the building," Mata went on. "And posted both of them to the magazine, showing how the shape of your figure was the basic shape of the building."

"And he or she pegged it as being me," Muriel made it an absolute statement.

"Yep. A couple of national media outlets picked up on it, and are running it," Mata said.

"Whoopee," Muriel said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. In fact, it sounded more like a dirge. "I'm famous."

"We've been fielding calls all morning," Mata said.

"WHAT all morning? I just got up!" Muriel said.

"Well, I can't help it if you decide to come to work late," Mata responded.

"WAIT A MINUTE! It's only JUST eight o'clock," Muriel said. "And I've been here yammering with you for at least ten minutes." Mata just snickered. "Grrr! You enjoy that, don't you?"

"Of course. But it woke you up," Mata said. "Seriously, the calls started at seven. Every media outlet wants to interview you. Oh, and of course, they all want it to be an exclusive interview."

"NOT going to happen," Muriel said. "It was bad enough when Carla confessed that she'd used images. OK, so what's on for the day? And make sure it involves my being out of the country, someplace."

"Unfortunately, there's nothing on for today. We're just telling the media that you aren't giving out interviews," Mata said. "And the guards are cautioned to not allow media into the Palace. Well, that's standing orders, anyway. But it's been reinforced, and they're even watching the walls for possible climbers. We'll keep them away from you."

"We? You've got Envoys in on this, too, haven't you?" accused Muriel.

"Well . . . yep. They're watching the walls and gates, in stealth," Mata admitted. "You do realize that, if this person is trained and knows how to do research, he or she is going to come up with the image of you that you used to create the sculpture, don't you? And against the backdrop of the building, at that."

"Grrr! Sometimes people are TOO danged intelligent," Muriel said.

"Well, there is some GOOD news. The artist didn't SAY that it was you. Just that that's

how the design was done,” Mata said.

“Did the artist identify the image of me chewing out the Pope?” asked Muriel.

“Well, yes”

“Then he or she might just as well have said that it was me,” Muriel said. “Oh, what a WONDERFUL day! I won’t be able to leave the office for the next three years without getting accosted over this.”

“Over what?” Hanna asked, coming into the office.

“And that’s another thing. Anybody who’s trained can get in here,” Muriel said. “You’ll never keep all the media out.”

“Will somebody tell me what this is all about? Please?” asked Hanna.

Mata turned her monitor around and showed Hanna the article. “Oh, my,” Hanna said, as she read it. “Yea, I can see what the problem is. Um . . . what if it could be suggested that it WASN’T that image that Carla used?”

“What have you got in your beady little mind, young lady?” Muriel said.

“Oh, no! I’m not falling for that one,” Hanna said. “After all, there are SOME things a girl shouldn’t disclose.” And she snickered. “However, what if Carla could show a different image. One that’s more recent. Of a young girl in that mantled pose.”

“You forget,” Mata said, “Muriel’s the only one that uses the Peregrine Falcon wings.”

“Well . . . uses them regularly, anyway,” Hanna said. “ANYONE can use them, sometimes. It’s just not what they’d normally use.”

“So, how do we get this ‘young girl’ and Carla together to fake the shot?” asked Muriel, beginning to come out of her funk.

“Simple. Carla doesn’t have to be here to take the shot. It’s too early for her, anyway. But we could create it and send it to her. All I have to do is wear something white that looks like a uniform, but isn’t. The figure, both the building and the sculpture, are vague enough that it could be just about anything,” Hanna said. “So, we take the image of me doing the mantling and send it to her.”

“Hmm. Sneaky,” Muriel said.

“Yea, I know. But kids have to be, to get around their parents,” Hanna grinned.

“I think I’m going to remember that,” Muriel said. “It might come in handy when I have my own kids.”

"Aw, you'd ruin all their fun!" Hanna said.

"Better than having to bail them out of trouble all the time," Muriel said.

"Huh! I don't think you remember how YOU were, when you were a kid," Hanna said.

"ONLY TOO WELL!" Muriel said. "I was a little hellion. And that was a nasty way to argue your case for being sneaky. Why should I let my kids get away with the sorts of things I got into as a kid?"

"Well, for one thing, maybe because the way you were as a kid led you to become the way you are, today. The compassionate friend to everyone," Hanna said, grinning.

"And that's an even nastier argument. Back to the topic," Muriel said. "How do we get this image, and get Carla to go along with the ruse?"

"One step at a time," Hanna said. "First the image. I've got this white jacket that I wear sometimes," and she changed into it, "that looks something like your Class A uniform jacket. At least, the upper part does. I got it last year, because it looked stylish and set me off from some of my friends. But I don't wear it much, any more, because they said it made me look too old."

It took the rest of the morning to plan it out. The jacket was good. Unlike the uniform jacket that Muriel wore, this ended at the waist with a built-in belt that strapped one side to the other. But it had the stand-up collar of Muriel's uniform jacket. No, the hard part was getting the wings right. Then getting Hanna's hair right. And then the glow. But finally, it was about noon and they thought they were ready to make the try, so they translated to the American Enclave.

Carla was just coming into her office when they arrived, and Muriel explained what had happened. "I know who this artist is," Carla said. "And no, I didn't show her the image I used. Mainly because I used a combination of a few of them, to get the right effect. I could easily say that I staged it on previous images, and had Hanna pose for me. IF she can hit the pose that I need." Hanna just grinned, and hit it.

"O-K. We just need a place to do this. There's a building down the street that doesn't have a textured wall. The sun should be off it at this time of day. Let's go see," Carla said. And laughing and acting up, like kids, they went, followed by Carla's squad.

In order to make a plausible fake history, Carla staged several shots, including those that definitely showed that it was Hanna. And the final one looked exactly like both the building and the sculpture that Muriel made.

"You're not going to tell me who the artist is, are you," Muriel said as they walked back to Carla's office.

"Nope. No sense in causing trouble. But, sometimes I've contributed to this magazine. I should be able to create an article, 'Close, But No Prize', that outlines how I did it. At least enough to take you off the hook, Muriel. Don't worry, I can come up with a plausible story."

And she did. The one good thing about an on-line magazine, was that they didn't have to wait a month for the next issue to come out. That, and the articles would have comments from the readers. Carla submitted her article, and it was on the 'front page' of the magazine within an hour. Of course, it helped that Carla was an 'established professional' and a rising star in design. Getting an article from her was like getting a visit from the President.

And it worked. Suddenly comments, that compared the two articles on the creation of the image, began to sway toward Carla's interpretation. Some of it was fueled by the fact that the designer of the building said 'this is the way it happened'. Some of it was the fact that Carla showed how the images were staged, and showed the model from the beginning to the full glow display. And some of it was because Carla said that she wasn't trying to show an individual, but rather the nurturing, caring, attitude that many people have.

"OK, kid, it worked," Muriel said, grinning at Hanna. "But isn't this going to cause you trouble?"

"Naw. Enough people know that I work with Carla, sometimes. Do poses for her, and stuff, when she's working on new clothing for girls my age," Hanna said. "My friends will tell them that, too, as they've seen some of the poses I've done. At worst, I'll be known as 'the model for a building' for a while. So? I blow it off, and the interest will die. I'm not someone important. I'm just a kid with a part-time job."

Muriel and Mata translated back to Britain just in time for Taylor to come into her office. "Whew!" he said, as he sat down in her casual area. "Poor Janice was deluged with phone calls about my consort posing for a building. It finally just dropped off."

Muriel grinned, and told him what happened. Even showed him the article that started the whole thing, and the response that Carla made to it, using Hanna as the model. And Taylor started laughing.

"Well, you managed to skin out of that one. I hope you thanked Hanna for her help," he said.

"Yep. And Carla, too. I'll admit that Hanna somewhat surprised me. She grabbed hold of what had happened and came up with a solution VERY quickly. Carla, on the other hand, didn't surprise me. We've been friends for too long, and covered each other's backs too often. She took Hanna's suggestion, and actually staged it the way an artist would work. Made it very real. And coming from the designer of the building, it pretty much shut down the person that supposedly 'debunked' the way the design was done."

"So, you don't know who it was?" asked Taylor.

"Nope. Carla wouldn't say, though she says she knows who it was. I'm just glad that

whoever it was concentrated on me instead of trying to get Carla's drafts and examine it from that side. By concentrating on me, she left enough holes for Hanna and Carla to come up with a plausible way it was done," Muriel said.

"What if they come up with the images of you creating the sculpture?" Taylor asked.

"Well, that one I can blow off. It didn't matter WHO the figure was. And I needed something to use as a model for it. In fact, it feeds right into Carla's explanation, because I can show how it was staged, and how I created the sculpture from it," Muriel said. "And if asked why I didn't use Carla's images, I can say that it was because I needed it from several angles, and Carla only worked from one. And THAT, at least, would be right."

"So, how do you explain the fact that Hanna was there, and you could have used her for the model?" Taylor asked.

"I didn't think of it?" Muriel responded, grinning. "I needed Hanna for a focus? Don't worry about it. I think it'll blow over, now."

"You're lying to people," Taylor said.

"Which would you rather have? Me lying to them? Or a whole bunch of people worshiping me and making up legends about me that turn into a religion that takes advantage of people?" asked Muriel.

"Hmm. Point made. What's your balance say?" he asked

"That this is the easy way out," Muriel said. "That this way less people get hurt."

"Well, your balance has never been wrong, Mata says," said Taylor. "So, yea, I think it will blow over now."

Chapter 38

Expect the Unexpected

(Thursday morning)

“Oh! . . . Oh, my What idiot came up with this one,” Mata said.

“Came up with what?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, some jerk is saying that Taylor only came to America to steal America's most eligible girl, an now refuses to return to America. That you're being held captive, and pining for your family and friends,” Mata replied.

“Oh, really? He was only formally invited once, and that was simply because his parents were invited. All the other times he's been there were unofficial, and to see”

“Exactly. To see you,” Mata said. “It goes on to say that he spurned a formal invitation from the President.”

“Nope. Nothing like that. We sent our apologies, but things were too much in flux to leave the country at that time,” Muriel said. “And Melanie understood. She even came over for the coronation and talked with us. There were no hard feelings about it, and we tentatively set it up for sometime when things had stabilized some. This is spin! Who's doing it?”

“Doesn't say. But I've got Fred looking into it. And you certainly aren't held captive. You've been back since then. Just yesterday, in fact,” Mata said.

“OK, let me see if Melanie's free to talk. There's only two groups that it could be. Politics is out – the parties were taken over by those that had the Envoy training, and they're not letting anyone run that DOESN'T have the training. That leave business or religion,” Muriel said.

“Or the drug runners,” Mata said.

“No, we trimmed their sails two ways. One, they don't have a market anymore. And second, we rounded up all the cartels and such that were doing it. Actually a third way, too. We trained most of the people in those countries, and got them off the drug economy,” Muriel said.

::Melanie, when would be a good time for me to see you?: Muriel sent.

::Any time. Bring a squad. I think I know what this is about, and we're investigating it,:: Melanie sent back. ::None of this came out of my office, I know that.::

“Mata, grab a squad. Maybe squad three. We're going to visit Melanie,” Muriel said. And moments later they translated out.

"Hey girl, behaving yourself?" Muriel asked, as she translated into the Oval Office.

"OH! GAD! Don't ask. And to think I used to head this bunch of pussies. They KNOW I'm untouchable. But I can't even pee without two of them watching me. DON'T become President. And no, I'm NOT going to try to be re-elected," Melanie replied. "They even revoked my BADGE! I'm afraid to go to Home for fear that dad will start in on me. 'What did you go and do a fool thing like that, for'?" she added, imitating Sergeant Carter, her father.

Muriel chuckled. "You don't really think he'd say that, do you?"

"Well . . . if he doesn't, he should. Even cleaned up, politics is dirty," Melanie said. "I see you've been doing some good over there."

"Yea, a bit. I'm still a target, but people are quickly coming to understand that that's a lost cause," Muriel said. "Taylor's managed to trump most of the abuse in British society, mainly by telling the top tier to either straighten out or leave. I swear, EVERYBODY thought they could control him. He's stood up to all of them. The last batch was the unions, and the leader of the delegation actually brought a gun with him. Now, the unions are disbanded, and their financials are under investigation. The union leaders will be in jail for a long time."

"Yea. I saw. And all because you had a building put up to help people. A glorified Guest House. I've seen pictures of it. That's one hell of a design that Carla came up with. And the sculpture you created! Beautiful!" Melanie said.

"Oh, don't tell me that YOU'RE thinking I posed for the building!"

"Nope," said Melanie. "Doesn't matter who posed for it. It's the symbol of peace and welcome, and not meant to be any one person."

"Whew! FINALLY!" Muriel said.

"Oh, yea. I heard about that. Carla did a good job of squelching that," Melanie said. "And that was Hanna in her pictures, wasn't it. MAN she's grown up. I feel sorry for the boys."

"So, any idea who's saying that I'm being held captive?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. Not yet. We get a thread to follow, and suddenly the thread breaks," Melanie said. "We started by back-checking the 'guest article' itself. The name led us to a little old lady in a nursing home with dementia. She hasn't even been allowed writing materials for years. Her family comes to visit AT LEAST once a week, and very often more than that. Sometimes, she can even remember her name."

"Poor lady."

"Yea. But she seems happy, from all the reports we've gotten on her. So, then we

checked on where it was mailed from. Turns out it was mailed from about six hundred miles away from there, dropped in a mail box at the side of a Post Office, at night. No security cameras,” Melanie said. “So next, they got the original and dusted for prints. Ended up printing everyone in the magazine office. And the prints matched about a third of them. No outside prints.”

“A player,” Muriel said.

“Yep. It's too neat for anything else BUT a player,” Melanie said. “But we trimmed all those when the governments got taken over by those with Envoy training.”

“Nope. NOT everyone,” Muriel said. “Mata, pull Fred off of it. This is a distraction. And we need to know what it's a distraction FROM. We know that it's someone educated, and trained in disinformation methods. Gender unknown, but I'd almost bet on male. Comfortable with American English, which indicates that he may have been educated in America and possibly spent some time here. What else?”

“Knows spy techniques, from the way he led us around with the false name and mail drop,” Melanie said. “Shit! Why didn't I think of it. You're right. So how do we tell what he's trying to distract us from?”

“Good question. What was your intelligence service working on?” asked Muriel.

“Hmm. Not much, since international things quieted down. Mostly, just keeping an eye on the fringe groups that try to start trouble every once in a while,” Melanie said.

“Mata, what was Fred working on when this blew up?” asked Muriel.

“Just the standard stuff,” Mata said. “You know, checking financials and emails for players . . . OH! You think he was getting too close to something?”

“Nope. Because if he was, we'd have it already,” Muriel said. “No, this is something else.” And she paused and thought. “Held captive. ANYONE that knows me knows that I'm not held captive. Why would he use that term? A fast check with my parents, friends, even Ted, would quickly show that I've been in and out of the country since I moved to Britain. Mata, can you check the document to see if it's got an embedded code? Key word stuff that couldn't be messed up by being reformatted for magazine or web publication.”

“On it. This may take awhile, though,” Mata said.

“So, Melanie, how's the country been doing?” asked Muriel.

“Great. We're gathering up the loose ends. That trick of yours of setting up a place for people that are destitute or homeless to get trained and back into society is working,” Melanie said. “Ted's spearheaded it, as far as buying up property from the banks so that the foreclosures have stopped. And the government has put up housing for the homeless and destitute. We haven't broken the unions, yet, but mostly because they're keeping their heads

down. And there are still jobs out there. Construction methods are swinging toward Envoy techniques, even if the materials LOOK like ordinary materials. Like Carla did with your building.”

“Well, that's a jump on Britain, but I think it's going to swing that way, soon. Taylor just ripped up the building inspectors over a problem we had,” Muriel said. And Melanie and Mata could see that she was still thinking. Hard. Despite what sounded like casual questions.

“What are you thinking about, girl?” asked Melanie.

“This isn't a physical attack,” Muriel said. “Oh, it may use a physical attack as a diversion, but the actual attack is social and psychological. And insidious. Right now, they're trying to say that I'm being held captive. Next it will be that I'm holding Taylor captive, or somehow manipulating him. And maybe others. Trying to make people doubt. Feed them enough plausible information that they think that there's something really going on. Melanie, you're not going to love me for this, but I want a list of all the groups that have someone in them intelligent enough to have written this article.”

“You've got it. It'll take time, but I'll get it to you. Anything else?” asked Melanie.

“Yea. Leave a group trying to find the tail end of the search for the author of the article. That's a diversion,” Muriel said. “And as a further misdirection, make it publicly known that I visited, today, and that it was about the article.”

“Nasty. You want it dispelled that you're a captive, and you want to throw the heat on the article,” Melanie said. “I like it. OK. Have I ever told you that you'd have made a wonderful spy. Or intelligence Officer?”

“Oh, thanks! That's ALL I need. Have someone decide that I'm a spy, and that I'm actually out to take over the world. I thought that was put to death with my action with the UN, when I chastised the President of Iran. Huh! Speaking of the UN, what are they doing, now?”

“Mostly, swapping lies with each other. Nothing important,” Melanie said.

“Trained people?”

“Some,” Melanie replied. “NOT a majority. We have some in there. So do a few other countries. If it helps, any countries that had representatives there that would have tried to stir up this kind of trouble would have pulled those representatives. All the countries are headed by trained people, now. You're trying to figure out what group it is by eliminating any of the others, aren't you?”

“Yea. But I think I'm going to have to put someone else on it,” Muriel said. “Well, actually, some team. It's too much for one person alone.”

“Muriel, it may not be an untrained person,” Mata said. “Or group of people. They may be partially trained, so they know some of your methods, but not balanced. And they may be

trying to turn the fully trained ones, and get them to stop using the balance.”

“Like the former President, until you took him Home, one time, and he realized what a mess he was making of it,” Melanie said.

“That thought crossed my mind. How to find them HASN'T crossed my mind, yet,” Muriel said. “Of course, there's enough empty space, there, that it could be hiding almost anywhere in it and I wouldn't know it.” And Melanie snickered.

“Quiet, you,” Muriel said. “I don't see you coming up with answers.”

“Of course not. That's not my job. I'm supposed to sit here and look pretty, not intelligent,” Melanie said. “Didn't you know? Presidents are elected on looks. Look pretty – or handsome – and sincere and concerned, and you're a shoe-in. Look like a rabid ditz, and you're out on your ear. Know why I've always worn pants? Because that way someone couldn't get an 'accidental' picture up under my skirt. The opposition even tried to get pictures of me that would show that I was a 'loose woman'. Didn't work, because, even though I had Secret Service around me, I had my own shields on any room or suite I was staying in. And my phone was smart enough to be able to locate any sort of transmitter, so bugs were easily taken care of. Must have cost the opposition a couple of million dollars just in bugs.”

“Muriel, I was so happy to see you and Taylor get together. You two deserve each other. You've both worked so hard to make it work, and you both seem stronger and happier than I've ever seen you,” Melanie added. “Keep him safe, girl. This attack may not be aimed at you. And even if it is, he could be collateral damage. And I have an idea what would happen if he was somehow taken out of the picture. You'd go berserk. And I wouldn't blame you and might even help you.”

“Hunch?” asked Muriel.

“Not even quite a hunch. Just a nagging thought. We don't know where this is coming from or going to,” Melanie said. “Oh, and I already know how Taylor feels about you. Anything happen to you, and the Regiment would ride again. And NO place on earth would be safe.”

“How do you know?” asked Muriel.

“Because he's already talked to me. Not as long, but just as intense. He'd seen the article, too,” Melanie said, “and is investigating it in another direction. He was here just before you. That's why I was free.”

“Oh.”

“Yea, 'oh'. You picked a good one, and helped him grow up on HIS terms. And he knows it,” Melanie said. “You didn't shape him, he shaped himself. But you made him work at it, and not fall back on following you. Oh, he listens to you. Just like you listen to him. Just two people that have decided to walk the same path, together. Now, let's get some

congress-critters in here to see that you're actually here, and not a captive. Then you can go back to your love and confess all over him. And he all over you. And let that lead where it will inevitably lead," she added, grinning.

The congressmen and women were brought in three or four at a time, and Melanie discussed various aspects of what the country needed with them. While Muriel sat quietly, except when spoken to. In all, about a hundred people saw that she was free to move about as she chose. And all were happy to see her. And happy that she'd chosen Taylor as a consort. So, it was a smiling Muriel that returned to her office

Chapter 39

Comfort Zone

(Thursday afternoon)

Taylor was waiting for her when she arrived. "I know," he said, going to her. "I saw the article. I'm looking into the political possibilities. And I must have left Melanie just before you arrived. I don't understand the thing about your being a captive. It doesn't make sense. There's too many people that have seen you outside the Palace, and even in other countries."

"Melanie and my crew are working some angles, including financials and emails, and possible splinter groups. I'm looking backwards. Who do I KNOW wouldn't be involved in this. Processes of elimination, trying to home in on who MIGHT be doing it. Can you think of some others?" asked Muriel.

"Not right off hand," he said, and Muriel put her head on his shoulder. "Ted's crew is working on it, too. I'm not exactly sure what, though."

"It's a distraction," Muriel said, then looked up at him. "Somebody wants either me or the public distracted by this while something else happens. The unions are headless, now. The companies are either under control or out of the country and forbidden to even sell anything second or third hand, here. You nailed the Anglican church to the wall right off the bat. They might try to backlash, but I can't see that they have the funds to do it. And whoever put that article in the magazine is a player. Not only that, he's using every bit of trade-craft that I've heard of the intelligence network using. Who could afford an intelligence officer?"

"A government," Taylor said. "But that makes no sense. We know the stand of all the countries."

"Rogue intelligence department?" asked Muriel. "America had that for a while, until the CIA was finally shut down. They eventually even demolished the building, because people had been getting in there and using the resources to make attacks."

"Possible. But you'd think you'd have heard something before now," Taylor said, hugging her. "I don't think the attack will be on you or any of the fully trained, simply because they, and you, can defend yourselves. Passively and actively. Even the partially trained can put up passive defenses."

"That's the strange part of this," Muriel said. "It makes no sense to try to attack the trained, physically. I think it's something different. I think it's an attempt to get those that aren't actively using the balance to begin to think negatively about us – create a rift in the trained. The only other thing it could be is an attack on the UN-trained, and try to say that we did it. Or maybe both of those things."

"Well, lunch. Let your mind go limp for a while and just relax," Taylor said. "We don't even have to leave the office. Chuck can handle it. I checked. He's not busy, and he's

concerned about you.”

“OK, Lunch, then,” she said, and went and collapsed in her recliner.

“Rough one?” asked Taylor.

“No, not at first. A few minutes talking to Melanie. THEN it got rough. She had about a hundred members of Congress come in three and four at a time to see that I wasn't a captive. All I had to do was sit and smile. I think I broke it.”

“Which? Your smile, or your sitter,” asked her consort.

“Well, I'll admit that it was a pain in the butt. But I think it's my smile that's broken,” she replied. “Ooo! Pizza! How'd you know?”

“Chuck suggested it.” Taylor said. “He said something about it being your 'think food'.”

“Yea. Because when I eat it, I don't think,” she said, grabbing a slice. “Mmm.”

“Chuck, do you make these?” asked Taylor.

“Yep. First year, I didn't. We used to get them from a shop in the city,” Chuck said. “That worked during the day. But late at night, they were closed. So, I started boning up on how to make them. My first experience in creating meals, whole. She'll never know what the first one looked like.”

“Well, you certainly do a good job, now,” Taylor said. “One of the biggest reasons that I used to visit so often was because of the food.”

“Yep. Growing boy. I remember those times. And you were always welcome,” Chuck said, grinning. “Made me feel good to see you pack it away.”

“Did I ever thank you?”

“Oh, sure. OK, sometimes not in words, just in appreciation,” Chuck said. “But more and more often in words. You've always tended to do that. In fact, the times it was just appreciation there was usually something else going on. Discussions and stuff. Perfectly understandable that you wouldn't get a chance to.”

“Well, consider yourself thanked, now. And for an extra special reason,” Taylor said. “She needed this.”

“You're welcome, sir. My pleasure, I assure you,” Chuck said, and smiled and left.

“You know,” Muriel said around her second slice of pizza, “whoever this isn't going to hit trained people. First thing they're trained in is making shields and keeping them up. And he's not going to go after the untrained. A lot of them are elderly, and parents of trained

people. It would be political suicide to do that. He'd have EVERYBODY after him. So, it isn't going to be physical. It's going to be just like this first article was. Disinformation. We can counter that with ridicule and truth. Mata!"

"On it. I'll have Betty whomp something together, then you two can hash it out," Mata said.

"Thanks boss," Muriel said, and reached for a third slice. Mata just gave an indulgent smile and went back to her own pizza.

"Is that pizza private, or can anybody grab a slice," a female voice from the door said.

"SALLY! What are you doing here?" asked Muriel "Oh, Sally, I don't think you've met my consort. Taylor, this is one of my earliest friends, and one that helped me over a rough period of growing up. Sally, His Majesty, Taylor, King of Britain and my consort."

"Taylor to my friends or Muriel's. Come, sit! Grab a slice. Tell Chuck what you want to drink," he said.

"Oh, my! Now I'm hobnobbing with a KING! The gang back home will NOT believe this," Sally said.

"Oh, we can take care of that. Finish eating, first, though," Taylor said, grinning.

"You still haven't said why you were here, young lady!" Muriel said.

"Young lady, indeed. I'm older than you are. Well, I came to see this astounding office. Carla, huh? I've seen her office. But three dimensional walls? Unbelievable," Sally said.

"Uh, huh. You come all this way to admire the walls? Try again," Muriel said.

"OK, I'M going to write the article. Mata filled me in on what you want, and I think I can deliver. And I know what publication to put it in, and it'll be no problem getting it there, since I own it," Sally replied.

"You WHAT?"

"I own it. Various jobs I did paid well, so I started my own on-line magazine about a year ago. Before that, I was freelancing," Sally said. "I've been busy, or I'd have dropped by more often to keep you up-to-date. Anyway, it's been well received, and I've got subscriptions like you wouldn't believe, so it pays well. Every once in a while, I run a new article on the front page that's free. Usually, because it has something to do with current events. And this does, so it'll be on the front page the day after you approve it."

"Whoosh. Just like that!"

"Yea, just like that," Sally said. "And you'd be surprised at the cross section of the

world that reads it. It's not just America. There's subscriptions from all over, and some of them are important leaders. Melanie reads it, for example. So does Sergei. So do a bunch of national leaders. Anna sometimes submits to the magazine. It's actually her team that writes the article, and she knows that I know that."

"Oh, my," Muriel said.

"We get it, too, Muriel," Mata said. "It's got a broader readership than the one the original article was in."

"And besides, I owe you one. It was my magazine that ran that story alluding to you being the model for that new building that Carla did for you. When Carla sent in the real thing, I blasted the original author for not fact-checking. I want facts for the magazine. I'm not turning it into a rumor rag," Sally said.

"You wouldn't, by any chance, have received a copy of the one that said I was being held captive, would you?" asked Muriel.

"Actually, I did," Sally said. "It was handed in at the desk. The woman didn't give her name, just dropped it off and left. The receptionist was so startled by the abruptness of the woman that she remembered her, and told me about her."

"She didn't, by any chance, remember the woman's face, did she?" asked Muriel, 'casually'.

"Well, yes. In fact, she was so startled by her that she gave me the image of her," Sally said, and pulled out her phone. "Hold on . . . um . . . yes, here it is."

"Just send it to my phone, please," Muriel said. Sally did, and Muriel asked the phone to identify the woman pictured. "Well, we'll just see what we can find out, then. Sally, the reason that I asked for the picture is to see if we can track back to the source of that article. A number of us are beginning to think that the source of the article may be attempting to cause some sort of disruption. As a result, we're trying to find out more information, to see if we can head off such a disruption before it happens. It's our own version of 'fact-checking'."

"You really think there's something to it?" asked Sally.

"Well, ask yourself why someone would go to such lengths as to write an article that claimed that Taylor had stolen me from my home country and I was being held captive," Muriel said. "Especially, since many people have seen me, and seen that I'm not being held captive, and that I can go where-ever and whenever I want. Or that he's ashamed to go back to America and hasn't been back since he took me. Now, it may just be a rumor monger. But there are other factors, too. The fact that neither my troops or Ted's or Melanie's resources could locate the author. To put it bluntly, whoever it is is using techniques that the intelligence community uses to hid their identity. In essence, he or she is acting like a spy."

"Oh, my," Sally said. "Yea, I see why you'd be interested in the source. I should have

told you about this, sooner. The article came in to us about a month ago. I didn't run it because, despite it being well written, I KNEW that you'd been in and out of America, visiting friends and your parents. It sounded more like a jilted lover sort of thing. Someone trying to say that you were forced to go with Taylor against your will. And that just didn't sound like you."

"A month ago, huh?" Muriel said. "Interesting. So, it took this long for whoever it was to manage to find a magazine that would publish it. And that was about the time when the whole thing was going down with Parliament. And, as a matter of fact, I was still in my old office, and Taylor was staying in the American Enclave until things shook down. So, at that time, I hadn't gone anywhere. It sounds like someone missed their timing."

"Muriel, I'm going to ask a rather sensitive question. You don't have to answer, but it might be another lead. When you and Taylor started being seen together – what was that, five years ago? – had you been seeing anyone else?" asked Sally.

"Nope. And yea, it COULD have been a sensitive question, except that I'd been so busy that I hadn't considered a personal life. Oh, I didn't reject it. I literally didn't think about it," Muriel said. "I remember having a discussion with Ted about that. I saw Fran and Don pairing off, and wondered if I'd ever find someone. And that I was always too busy to get involved with anyone. Then Taylor asked for help, and we pulled that outrageous dinner date."

"Oh, that! I was working for another magazine, at the time, and had to write a VERY neutral and watered down account of it for them. I'll tell you, that was crippling for me," Sally said. "Here, I wanted to cheer, and instead I had to do it as a 'toss off', with no passion or understanding of what was going on. Just a footnote to history sort of thing. There were so many levels to what you were doing. Pulling Taylor out of that rumor mill, and at the same time doing a major 'put down' of the media by playing the King and Queen of the Elves. And Taylor, introducing you as a Duchess."

"Well, technically, I am," Muriel said. "Oh, it's a paper thing, and was an attempt on the part of his grandmother to make me eligible to marry Taylor. More manipulation."

"Wait a minute? You're royalty?" Sally asked.

"Yea, well, like I said, it was all done on paper," Muriel said. "Purely meaningless except that it helped cross some ayes and dot some tees. Just nonsense, really, and nobody really believes it. It was part of a package, making me a citizen of Britain, and such. I think it was also an attempt to grab back the land that Home purchased for the British Enclave. If I was a citizen, and bought the land, then it was still part of Britain and not part of Home, therefore, they could still rule over it instead of it being sovereign territory and outside the laws of Britain. Well, the idea fell apart on them. I was never notified until years after that I'd been named a citizen and a Duchess. Like I said, pure nonsense."

"Oh, girl! No wonder the British people took to you. You were 'one of them', and a Royal," Sally said.

“Not really a Royal, but elevated, certainly, and eligible to become a Royal in their culture. We squelched that one by becoming Consorts by the rules of Home,” Muriel said. “Parliament had forgotten that a person of any rank ALWAYS goes by the highest rank they hold, under their culture. It was a whole mess of Britain trying to turn Home into a satellite of Britain. It ended up working against them. Because the reality would have been that Britain would have been a satellite of Home. It resulted in a number of Members of Parliament being accused of treason. And that paved the way for Taylor to take the throne.”

“Oh. My. Gosh. No, that never came out. And it won't, now, either. But girl, you were walking through a mine field,” Sally said. “And nobody but you knew about it!”

“Well, Taylor knew. His father had already taken himself out of the succession. He never really wanted that whole mess,” Muriel said. “So, Taylor was the only one eligible. There weren't any other eligible heirs. He threatened to abdicate, and that finally lead to the Queen resigning and Parliament being arrested.”

“Nobody would ever believe all this,” Sally said. “It's like something out of a very convoluted nineteenth century romance novel!”

“What one? 'Withering Heights'? Obviously, I never liked that Gothic horror,” Muriel laughed. “They were so obvious about it that it was easy to see what they were trying to do. So, we just sidestepped them. Now, they don't know WHAT to do with me.”

“So, what you need, right now, is some way to flush out whatever is going on with this article,” Sally said.

“Exactly! If it's nothing but somebody's perceived 'sour grapes', then we can expose it for that and go on,” Muriel said. “But if it's more, then we need to know how to counter it. We're looking for the real motives, not the appearances.”

“Oh, my. OK,” Sally said, “even more than ever, I want to do what I can to help.”

Chapter 40

The End of the Beginning

(Thursday afternoon, later)

“Well, I think we should take a break from all this high level maneuvering,” Taylor said, “and take the opportunity to provide you with proof of your current social position and standing.” And Muriel started laughing, while Sally just looked puzzled.

“Taylor! Cut it out!” Muriel gasped out. “Sally isn’t Parliament. And I don’t think she understands your humor. Sally,” she said, as she finally settled down, some, “Taylor is offering to have an image made of you two together. And just for that, young man, I expect you to be properly attired. Full formals, Taylor, instead of that casual suit. Let’s give the people at her office a REAL thrill. Mata, can you help us?”

“No problem,” Mata laughed. “Personally, I LIKED that long winded and pompous statement. How about we do this just outside the doors, where there’s more room for your fly plaids. Yes, you too, Muriel. We might as well do it right.”

“Oh! Oh, I couldn’t! I’m not dressed for anything like this!” Sally said.

“When has that ever been a problem for someone with training,” Muriel said, urging her friend outside and with Taylor trailing along behind.

“Well,” Taylor said, “Since we’re doing it up, formally, maybe we should also give her one with us showing off those outrageous costumes we used for that dinner date that started the whole thing rolling.”

“Sure. Two images. Bookends,” Muriel grinned. “Come on, Sally! He’s just a man. He isn’t going to bite, or anything. Just a guy that’s a friend.”

“B-B-But . . . he’s a KING!” Sally exclaimed.

“But . . . he’s just a man,” Muriel tossed back. “Come on, Sally. You talk to Melanie. Do you treat her any differently? We’re all just people doing a job. So, you’re in a different country and talking with a King instead of a President. Big deal. Just another person.”

“It was much easier when I was talking with you, and could ignore him,” Sally said.

“Oh, right! Well, I’VE been put in my place. It’s easy to talk to the Leader of Home, but not to the King of Britain!” Muriel laughed.

“Oh. Oh MY! Oh, My Gosh! But I don’t think of you that way!” Sally said. “You’re just a friend that I’ve known for years!”

“Of course. And now, you’ve met a new friend,” Muriel said. “How would you talk if

you were interviewing him, like you do Melanie or me? What sort of questions would you ask him? What would your readers want to know?"

"They'd want to know about what Taylor was like, really. You know, hobbies, interests, what he likes in music or literature," Sally said, not really thinking about what she was saying.

"Oh, well, that's easy," Taylor said. "Hobbies – well, polo, which I don't get to play anymore. I enjoy the classics, such as Shakespeare, as well as some off-beat stuff like 'Tom O'Bedlam' and 'The Fairies'. In fact, that was the image that became the Regiment of Home – 'A burning spear and a horse of air'. But I think what I read the most is what's called Science Fantasy. Now, music. Believe it or not, I do like some modern music. But I also like the Classics – symphonic and ballet music, especially. Some opera, but not much. Most of it I found to be rather pointless, like those nineteenth century romances that Muriel alluded to with her mispronunciation of 'Wuthering Heights'. Oh, and especially now, my main interest is Muriel. There's more entertainment there than in all the plays and books combined." And Muriel hit him. And blushed. And giggled.

"What do you feel your job is, as monarch to a country?" asked Sally, getting into 'interview' mode.

"Mostly, to keep the peace and provide for the people," Taylor said. "That doesn't mean give-aways that would cost the country money. But it does mean making sure that training and education are available, and that people can find jobs that they enjoy doing, not just something that they HAVE to do to make a paycheck," Taylor said. "It does mean providing medical care, and someplace off the streets for the less fortunate. Muriel led the way with the building she had put up. I've encouraged the various committees in the country to do the same. We'll see how that works out. I don't believe people need to be beaten into submission and spied on. Rather, they need to be led and encouraged to be the best that they can. Unfortunately, this is a time of flux, and there will be some times when I have to take an active stand and say, 'no'. Much like a parent needs to correct children when they act out."

"Oh, MY!" Sally said, as she suddenly realized that both Taylor and Muriel were now in whites, and that Taylor was wearing a crown and sword. "S-S-So there are still laws in Britain?"

"Of course. Oh, there will be fewer as people get used to being responsible for themselves," Taylor said. "But that's a slow process, and starts with eliminating unnecessary laws. And I can't do much about that until Parliament is in session. I CAN try to address various injustices that occur in the country. But even there, I can only do it by edict, and not by the formal political process. There are a lot of rights that people have lost over the years – perhaps centuries. I'd like to see them restored. But humans on earth will need laws for a long time. Until a realization of one's responsibilities is universal, there will be laws to maintain order. China is a fascinating experiment that seems to be working. It makes do with just one law, and the administration of services. But the people, themselves, are the police there. They've taken the responsibility of keeping the peace very seriously. Perhaps it was because they had such an abusive government for so long. I don't think that would work,

here. Different people, different culture. And the biggest reason that Muriel insisted that she did NOT want whole countries turned into Enclaves."

"There is another reason, too," Muriel said. "I wanted countries to retain their culture, and build on it. Diversity is beautiful. China, though had had their culture crudely plowed under by their own government. They are now re-finding that culture and creating a new one from the best parts of the old. That's what is making it work. People interested in becoming." And as Sally listened to them, she realized that they'd changed again. This time to the Oberon and Titania costumes used five years ago. And yet, they were 'just two people' talking about the world as it was, now. Nothing special except the clothing.

"Well," Muriel added, "Something to remember the moment by." And she changed back into her familiar Class A uniform as Taylor switched back into the blue suit that wasn't a suit. "You know the background on the building. Did you know that there's a sculpture behind the reception desk? Yes, I made it, and I'll give you the disk of how I did it. But it, too, could actually be anybody," and she held out a miniature of the sculpture, and a disk. "My squad, Mata, Taylor, Carla and Hanna all participated in its creation. And this will show you how it was done."

"And we're done," said Mata. "Sally, I'm going to include a record of the interview you just had with Taylor and Muriel, so you can check against it for information. And here are three images for you to have, and you can decide which one is actually this pair of love-birds," she added, grinning. "Are they King and Leader? Something out of a fairy tale? Or just ordinary people doing a job?"

"This was staged, wasn't it?" asked Sally.

"Nope," Mata said. "Muriel just reacted to your reaction to Taylor in formals. Then let you and he run with it. Oh, the clothing changes had been decided on beforehand. But you were in on that and knew it was going to happen. And I caught the opportunity to add the third picture because Muriel was giving you that miniature of 'The Welcoming One'. Nope. Just happened, like so much of life."

"Sally, I'm going to give you a list of places I've been from before Taylor's enthronement to the present," Muriel said. "Also a list of places that Taylor has been, outside the country. The first list will show that I am NOT, in fact, a captive. The second will show that Taylor has been to America and visited the President. And so have I. And that the visits were not us, together, all the time. So, again, no captivity, and Taylor isn't avoiding America or it's President. Dropped into the same article, that these pictures and interview are going in, I think, will do more to dispel that other article than anything we could write."

"You think?" asked Sally. "Yea. Maybe you're right. Anything coming from either of you would just be tossed off as you lying. Yea. I can write it up," she grinned. "After all, you've given me enough material for a GOOD article. But . . ."

"You want more," Muriel finished for her.

"Well, yea. Is there a way to tell people what you've been doing during that time?" Sally asked. "I mean, not details or anything like that. Just a list that shows that you've been active over here, doing the sorts of things that you normally do."

"Yea, I think I can do that. Come on back inside, and I'll see what I can come up with," Muriel said. "And would that include things that I did in conjunction with Taylor? You know, sorting out some of the problems that Britain was facing?"

"Yea! Sure! After all, you ARE the Ambassador to earth," Sally said, as they went back to her casual area.

"Girl, this is going to be one LONG article. But, if you insist," Muriel said, grabbing her tablet from a 'no pocket' as she sat in her recliner. "Give me a few minutes while I sort the whole thing out and print it off. Talk to my consort, or something," she added, grinning, and went to work.

"Taylor, what have you been doing, during this time?" asked Sally.

"Well, mostly telling people what they couldn't do," he said. "You'd be surprised at how many people thought that they had the right to tell me what to do and how to do it. Businesses – that's multi-national ones – insisting that I was bought and paid for, and would now do what they wanted. Some of them no longer exist in this country, nor can they sell anything here, even through others. There's no excuse for that behavior, and I threw them out."

"Jeez! You can do that?" asked Sally.

"Yep. Where criminal intent is established – and believe me, it was – then yes, I have the authority to throw a company out and arrest the officers. And we did. Then there's the candidates for Parliament that tried to insist that I get rid of Muriel. Do you really think THAT'S going to happen?" he asked.

"I think, from what I've seen of you two together that they'd be in for one heck of a fight," Sally said. "What happened to them?"

"Well, to start with, they're no longer running for Parliament. I threw them out of my office because they were disrespectful toward Muriel and thought that I should be at their beck-and-call. Then we sent the record to the media. It so shamed them that they dropped out of the race. OH! I almost left out that the day before I'd attended the declaration of consort-ship of Fran and Don, and Carla and Jeff in the American Enclave," Taylor said.

"And then there's the Anglican Church that insisted that I hadn't been crowned King because THEY didn't do it," Taylor added. "They discovered their mistake when I eliminated all the funding that they've been getting from taxes on the people and various gifts – AND insisted that they pay taxes. I seriously doubt that they will EVER get involved in politics again."

“Good grief!” Sally said. “You’ve been busy.”

“Yea, and it goes on and on. Customs and immigration that was overcharging people, and the funds were funneled to the top of the pyramid. I think you can guess where that money was going to,” Taylor said. “I’ve got my legal team seeing if they can claw that back. It should make a lot of repairs to British society.”

“You missed one, Taylor,” Muriel said. “Citizens of Home, Ambassadors from Home, and Envoys are all accepted the same way citizens of Britain are. Now THAT is a biggie.”

“Hmm. You know? I never thought of it that way,” Taylor said. “But you’re right. It gives them the right to be in this country legally. Now, if only we could get that passed in other countries, it would free up a lot of travel.”

“Well, I tossed the information and arguments up on the mesh mind to pass out to the other Ambassadors, so all we can do is wait and see,” Muriel said. “It’s up to the Ambassadors in the countries to convince their governments. Ted’s already working on Melanie. Here you go, Sally. It’s kinda rough, but I think it will give you an idea of what I’ve been doing,” she added, handing her friend a two page list.

“GEEZ! Can I condense this?” asked Sally.

“Sure. Use what you think would be good to use,” Muriel said.

“Some of these are marked ‘with Taylor!’” Sally said, looking at the list.

“That’s because they affected both Britain and Home in one way or another,” Muriel replied. “Some were because of actions being taken against Citizens of Home. Others were actions directly affecting me, like people trying to get my office moved out of the Palace, or trying to say that a consort-ship wasn’t legal in Britain. I’m still a target.”

“And now, this article that says that you’re a captive. Well, this ought to squelch that. NOBODY that does all this stuff could be considered a captive,” Sally grinned. “What’s with this ‘tossing the caber’, though?”

“Oh, good relations with the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He had a braggart that needed trimming. The man had learned to toss the caber, which is like a big pole, when he was younger. I showed him up. Didn’t cure the guy’s attitude, though, so the Commissioner had to fire him,” Muriel said, and brought up the record of the caber toss to show her.

“How do you get all this stuff done?” asked Sally.

“Well, actually, it’s a combination of techniques. My mother told me about one, once, and I looked it up. The Religious Society of Friends believed – maybe still does – in using gentle, friendly persuasion to convince opponents the veracity of their arguments. I’ve found, though that it only works on those that are either neutral or already friends. And not always

then. There are times when some measure of force is necessary. Physical force to meet physical, mental to meet mental, and so forth. Oh, I have nothing against using gentle procedures. But if they don't work, then it's time to let them know that there's a limit to my patience and good-will. Some people have crossed the line to begin with. Then I don't give a chance. Gentle discourse is nice, and can certainly lead to interesting information, sometimes. But, more often than not, when humans have a firm belief in only one way of doing things, and that way harms other people, gentle discourse fails. Worse than fails. It looks like capitulation on the part of the one trying to be gentle. And slowly but surely, rights and privileges are eroded away. Nope," Muriel summarized, "most times I've had to act like a parent and say 'NO!', then back it up with sufficient force to ensure that the abuse stops."

"Sometimes that's necessary with governments, too," Taylor said. "And really, it goes back to even the animal kingdom. Look at how kittens and puppies are disciplined. Mama or daddy gives the little one a warning. When that doesn't work, a sharper, physical reminder is applied. Psychologists, back in the middle of the twentieth century, tried to say that punishing children was abuse. What they turned out are our generation's sociopaths caused by neglecting the discipline necessary to let the children know when they'd misbehaved. It takes many forms. And only sometimes is a quiet discussion effective. Nope. There's no one 'true' way.

"Well . . .," Sally said. "I'll get this out as quickly as I can. It probably won't be tomorrow. I've got a lot to work with. It might even have to be two articles. But I should have the first one out in a couple of days."

"Thanks, Sally. Whenever you can is fine. And I really appreciate it," Muriel said.



Meet the Author

Craig A. Eddy

I'm 67, retired and proud of it. I live in a science fiction world. When I was 14, I wanted a computer that would do the things the room sized ones could do, but would fit in a briefcase. I was thinking small. What I ended up with a few years later was one that could do those things and fit in my shirt pocket. And it's just gotten better. I've been a CAD operator (18 1/2 years) and a number of other things in my life, and now I write fantasy novels for my own amusement using a computer with no paid software on it. All free. Even the operating system (Linux).

Currently writing Fantasy books that are available as PDF files under Creative Commons License.

Bragging rights:

I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy a B.A. in BS